

## 14th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The Gospel of today's Mass focuses on mission. Since the Church exists in each local parish community, I thought that we might reflect together on the way in which the Church understands her mission, so that we, as a parish community, might become more sensitive to the call of the risen Christ to us to continue his mission in the world. The Church's call to mission is the main theme of the Vatican Council Document *Ad Gentes* (1965). It states clearly that being missionary belongs to the essence of being Church: 'The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary, since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'(n.2).

This takes us straight to the heart of the matter. God created out of love. As we say in the Mass: 'the heavens and the earth, are filled with the glory of God'. God has been pouring the Spirit of his love into the hearts of men and women of every culture since the beginning of the human race, filling people with longing for God, healing them of sin and drawing them into the communion of grace. God's Word, too, has echoed throughout history. Seeds of it are found in the religious stories and myths of every culture, and in every written or spoken word that comes from prayer and reveals truth.

As Christians we have the privilege of telling and showing the world that the Word was made flesh in Jesus and that Jesus is the one who has the Spirit without reserve. In 1990, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Vatican Council's document on mission, Pope John-Paul II wrote an encyclical on the Mission of the Redeemer ('*Redemptoris Missio*'). He reminds us that Jesus is: 'The definitive Word of God's revelation in whom God has made himself known in the fullest possible way ... The Gospel is the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about Himself'(n. 5).

Jesus' mission was to open people's hearts and minds to the gift of grace and so to bring about the full reign of God's love (see Luke 4:43). The mission of the Church is the same: 'Working for the Kingdom of God means acknowledging and promoting God's activity which is present in human history and is transforming it'(RM n.15). 'The whole Church is missionary. The work of spreading the gospel is a basic duty of the People of God' (Vat II AG §35).

In his address at the opening of the third session of the Second Vatican Council (Sept 14th 1964), Pope Paul VI states: 'The Church is not an end unto itself. Rather it is fervently concerned to be completely of Christ, in Christ and for Christ, as well as to be completely of humanity, among humanity and for humanity'(quoted RM n.19).

The Church is the 'sacrament of salvation for all mankind'(John-Paul II, RM n.20). In paragraphs 33-34 of his encyclical on the Mission of the Redeemer, Pope John-Paul II speaks of 3 levels of missionary activity that are essential to the Church's life. We could ask ourselves today how well we are being faithful to each of these tasks.

**The first level** is specific missionary activity in situations where peoples do not know Christ or his Gospel. 'To this Catholic unity of the people of God ... all are called, and they belong to it or are drawn to it in various ways, whether they be Catholic faithful or others who believe in Christ or finally all people everywhere who, by the grace of God, are called to salvation'(RM §9, quoting LG 13).

A more profound theological understanding has led to a certain maturing of the attitude of Christians to non-Christians. Pope Paul VI expresses it well in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975, n. 54): 'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive heritage of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel.'

Pope John-Paul II invites us to respect the prayer and the religious life of non-Christians: 'Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart'(John-Paul II, RM n. 29).

'The beginning of the reality of the Kingdom of God can be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live 'Gospel values' and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills [John 3:8]'(John-Paul II RM n. 20).

This in no way lessens the obligation of the Christian Church to show and preach the Gospel. However beautiful another religious heritage may be we want to tell them of what God has done and is doing for us in Jesus. As the Pope says: 'The Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures and she honours the sanctuary of conscience'(RM n.39).

The religion of Judaism is a beautiful religion. But Mary of Magdala was delighted to meet Jesus. She and many thousands of her contemporaries found Jesus to be the flowering of her religious heritage. He brought Judaism to a wonderful fullness and helped to open up its heart and clarify its message.

In the first centuries when the Church spread so rapidly, and indeed right up to our own time, people from all kinds of cultures have found the same. Christianity does not see itself as one of a number of religious movements. It recognises the Word of God in all authentic religious movements, but it sees Jesus as the Incarnation of God's Word. We want to tell everyone about him and encourage them, not to change cultures, but to find in him the fulfilment of all that is valuable in their own religious traditions. And so the Church continues to send missionaries out to lands and people that have not yet accepted to follow Christ. Are we as a parish nurturing such vocations? The life is heroic, but it is immensely privileged and immensely graced. Surely heroism has not died or the courage to be involved in a spirit of adventure!

We can also help carry out the mission of the Church to non-Christians while staying at home. A paper produced by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue for Pentecost 1991 and entitled 'Dialogue and Proclamation', speaks of different forms of Inter-religious Dialogue (n.42):

- The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the absolute.

Speaking of dialogue, Pope John-Paul II states: 'Dialogue is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit'(RM n.56).

**The second level** of missionary activity listed by the Pope is sharing Jesus' mission by caring for each other within the local Christian community. We all need love. We all need to see the love of Jesus in our Christian brothers and sisters. Furthermore a healthy, welcoming, local community is like a well cared for garden. All kinds of life can flourish in it, including the kind of vocations of which we have just been speaking. In this area of building a community of love, this parish has much to be grateful for and much of which we can be rightly proud. However today each of us might ask ourselves is there anything more that God is calling me to? Is the Spirit of God calling me and gracing me to contribute to the life of the parish more generously?

**Thirdly**, the Pope speaks of the mission of the Church to those who, though baptised, are unchurched. As a matter of interest it was this that inspired Jules Chevalier, the founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart to include the word 'missionary' in our title. He soon sent men and women off into the foreign missions where they lived and died in their thousands, but the word 'missionary' focused in the first place on a mission to the countryside of France where economic conditions and religious apathy had led to an enormous fall away from the faith and from participation in the life of the community.

There is so much we need to do here in our local community to reach out to the young, to those with young families and to the old and middle aged who have been confused by the changes since Vatican II or have given in to apathy or have been caught up and distracted by the routine of life, or through various personal hurts do not feel welcome among us. We are all missionaries of the Heart of Jesus. Is he calling you or me to a renewed commitment to prayer and to action to go out to these people and welcome them to the community and to Jesus who is at its heart?

We could echo the call that resounds throughout today's Responsorial Psalm. 'Come and see'(Psalm 66:5), 'Come and hear'(Psalm 66:16) the wonderful things which God has done for us. If it is truly our experience that God has not 'withheld his love from us'(Psalm 66:20), can we resist the call of Jesus to share this with others. We can all do something in one of the three areas outlined by the Pope. Let us take this occasion to examine our hearts and seek for the graced response to share in the mission of the Church.