

A MAN WITH A PLAN

Matthew 9.35- 10.8 Trinity 5, 2008

"Go and preach," Jesus says to his disciples, "The Kingdom of heaven is near! Heal the sick, bring the dead back to life, heal those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases, and drive out demons." (Matthew 10.7-8)

Jesus, someone has said, was 'a man with a plan'. In the beginning when he began his life's work at the time of his baptism by John in the Jordan he had gone around preaching about the Kingdom, he had taught, healed the sick and those with leprosy, he had driven out demons and he had even brought the dead back to life. A display of wonder-working power! But then he realised or the realisation was forced upon him that he couldn't do all this work on his own. There were simply too many people with too many problems for him to single-handedly cope with the work for which he had been commissioned. As he looked at the many people who came to hear him preach the Kingdom and those who came to him for healing or wholeness it seemed to him that there was a great 'harvest of people' but additional workers would be needed to gather it in. And so, in answer to prayer, he invited some others to join him in this work. They needed to be taught, of course, for preaching the Kingdom was not something that came naturally to any of those whom he had chosen, and they knew nothing about healing the sick far less how the dead might be brought back to life. He gave them the name 'disciples' a word which described people who were learning a skill or a trade, and then, when they were ready for the task he sent them as he had been sent by God into the world to share with him the work of preaching, healing, and many who were dead found new life. He was a man with a plan and they were people with a purpose.

In the course of 2000 years the world has changed beyond all recognition but the Church's mission has not! Nobody has actually said or suggested that the mission to the world that began with Jesus and his disciples who became apostles has come to an end. We as a church are or ought to be 'missionary minded people' always thinking about how best we can help Christ in his work of preaching the Kingdom in words and in deed. This is his plan, this is our purpose as members of his Church in the 21st century.

At a meeting of some of our 'younger' members the other night as part of our missionary strategy in this congregation, the question was asked, why are we here, why do we exist, what is the Church meant to do? It's a question that is asked again and again despite the many pulpit pronouncements about the Church's mission!

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to life, heal those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases, and drive out demons."

1. We are to 'go' as they were once told to go, the names that have passed into Christian legend! The brothers Andrew and Peter, James and John who were fishermen. And the rest of the group who were known simply as 'The Twelve', and they were to preach about the Kingdom.

I know, of course, that in the modern Church that 'preaching' has become something that is done from a pulpit, here in a church building, and by a minister - someone who has been specially trained and ordained. But, remember, it wasn't always like this. In the beginning the preaching was done by ordinary church members, the followers of Jesus, the disciple, and not in church buildings but on the streets and at the crossroads, wherever people met and where the majority were certainly not members of the Christian Church!

In the modern world such a thing is almost unheard of. This is, in part, because for long enough the assumption has been made that everyone in this part of the world knew about the Kingdom and the majority were Church members anyway. The figures do not always bear this out, but never mind, that was what people thought, and therefore there was no real reason to go out into the highways and byways and preach the Kingdom. The other reason is that, in our modern and much more sophisticated world such preaching in the streets and at the crossroads as people passed us by could be considered rather crude and even counter-productive. Communication today - and what is preaching if not a form of communication? - communication today is often much more subtle and is backed to the hilt by technology.

Surely if, today, we are to take seriously these words of Jesus, "Go and preach", as we should and as we must, our starting point would not be to go to some street corner and bellow 'the news of the Kingdom' at the top of our voice but to take whatever we had to say about the Kingdom to the copy writer, the commercial artist, the printer, the broadcasting studio, the film maker, and even the humble newspaper journalist. 'If' we were serious in getting our message across. The Church has been painfully slow in learning this lesson.

During her stay with us here in Scotland I arranged for Meg our Youth Worker to visit the studios of Radio Forth in order to be interviewed about her work and time with us here in Fairmilehead and for her to do some 'Thoughts for the Day' or 'View from Earth' as Radio Forth calls it. And although these broadcasts go out at some unearthly hour in the morning I was able to assure Meg that some people would be listening! In fact it is estimated that these regular early morning talks are broadcast in over 10,000 homes every day - that's a lot of listeners! To reach that

many people with news about the Kingdom from this pulpit would take me 2 years preaching on Sundays!!

There's a new film about to be released based on the works of that great Christian writer CS Lewis. "Prince Caspian" will be in the cinemas from next week just in time for the long summer holidays! How thoughtful of them to release this children's 'blockbuster' at this time! But my point is a serious one. How do I know that this great cinema - graphic event is about to happen? Because I heard someone shouting it at some street corner above the roar of the traffic? No. But because I have read the adverts in the paper, seen it 'trailed' on the TV, had it 'pop up' on my computer screen, seen it on the sides and backs of buses, on bill-boards - everywhere. The marketing man or woman has done his work well!

And that's where we should be today too, as a church, both local and national, if we are to take seriously our main mission of preaching the kingdom.

Now at this point some of us are thinking - apart from those whose job it is to promote various things through the media of print or radio or TV or whatever - that this can have nothing to do with me! I am 'off the hook!' I know nothing about modern forms of communication today so that these words do not apply to me! And while that may be true and while we often think of 'mission to the masses', the command to 'go and preach' can often be a case of 'one to one' relationships even as it was in the beginning. Sometimes whether at work or at school or at home we are 'put on the spot', as once 'they' were dragged before "Rulers and Kings", and our views about life are challenged. If, at such times in life, we rise to the challenge by sharing our views as Christians then, surely, the Kingdom has been more than adequately preached?

Preaching the Kingdom is one thing but healing the sick (not to mention raising the dead!) is another and part of our Church's mission. Again, the world has evolved and has moved on in the past 2000 years. Not many of us we might think we are in the business of 'healing the sick' unless, of course, we are members of the medical profession. So I was interested to read an article in last week's Times in which it was being reported that a number of Hospital Chaplains in England and Wales were about to lose their jobs. It was just another way in which Trust managers were trying to reduce their budget. Hospital Chaplains wouldn't be missed, or would they? The article was making the point that statistics show that Chaplains and other visitors play a vitally important part in the healing process. This is because we are not just flesh and bone that can be patched up by doctors and nurses and sent on our way again but complex human beings who have a soul as well as a body. The Trust managers have been asked to think again.

And, the old Royal Infirmary in Lauriston Place may be gone and no more than a distant memory but let's not forget too quickly the words above the old main doorway, the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, "I was sick and ye visited me."

And what about the idea of 'driving out demons' as part of the Church's mission? Again, in the modern world we have people who work in psychiatric medicine where those who fear that they might be possessed by demons end up. We are talking, remember, about people who are worried and helpless. There is no end to the amount of people who, today, in the modern world feel worried and helpless. (Only the other week we were talking about the present age in the words of WH Auden as "The Age of Anxiety") "Do not be worried and upset" Jesus tells his disciples in John's gospel and they presumably went on to tell others about the relief that Christ's words to those who are troubled in mind. I know that the Church still holds services of exorcism from time to time, but the greatest service we can render those who feel worried and helpless is that of the compassionate heart, full of patience, love and understanding.

The world is full of people who have never as yet heard the Good News of the Kingdom. Always and everywhere there are people who are ill and many who are frightened. Many do not know where to turn for the help that they need - they are like "sheep without a shepherd." Do we, as a Church, feel no pity for them? Or like Jesus do we see them as being part of a great harvest of souls but as yet there are not enough workers to gather it in?