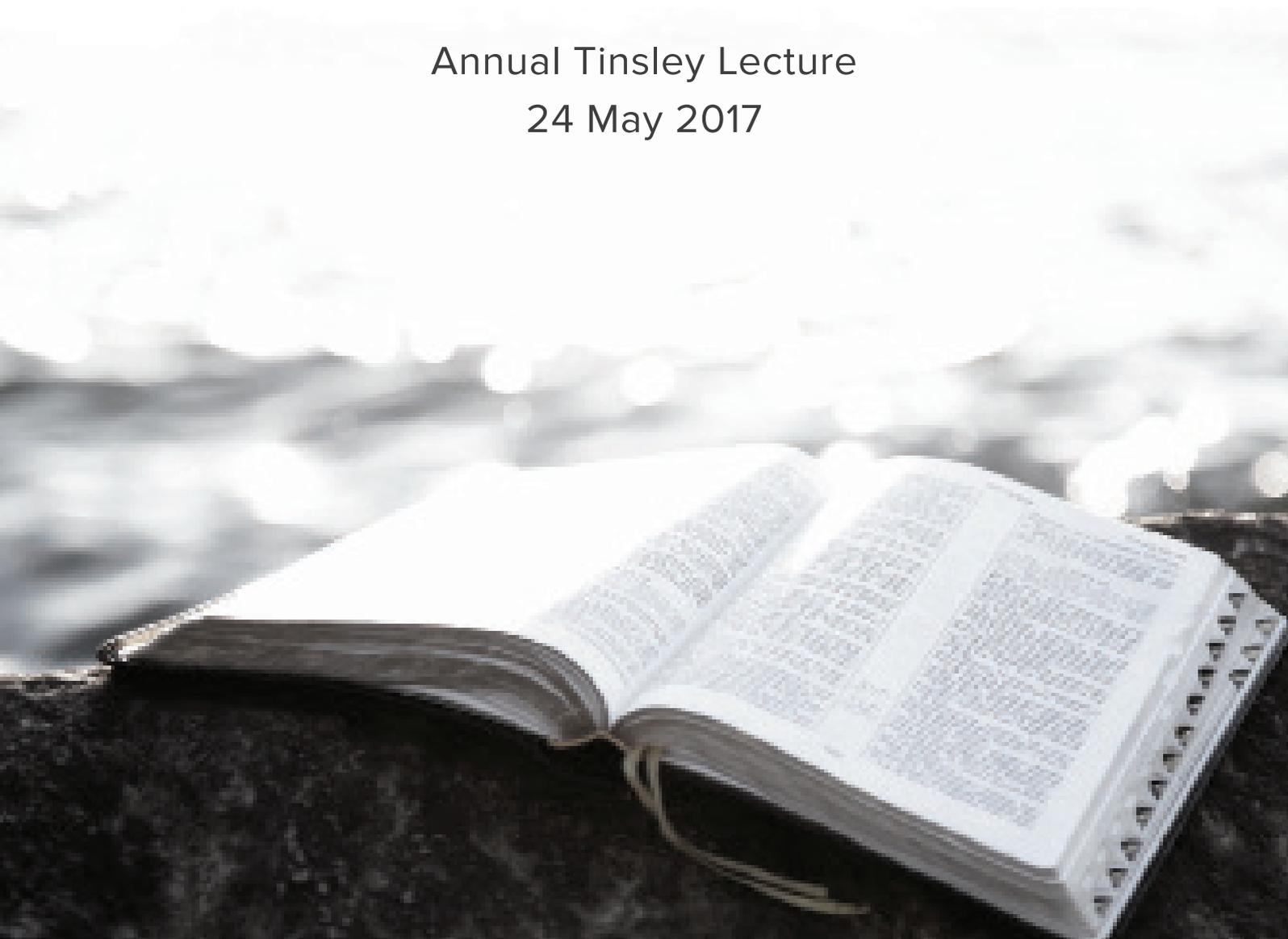


THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

FROM A THEOLOGY OF THE BALCONY
TO A THEOLOGY OF THE ROAD

Dr. Cathy Ross

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THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

FROM A THEOLOGY OF THE BALCONY TO A THEOLOGY OF THE ROAD

*The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.*¹

These are the first two sentences of Pope Francis' encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *The Joy of the Gospel* – the title of the first of these lectures. Immediately we find ourselves drawn in, introduced to Jesus and presented with an implicit challenge. Does the joy of the gospel fill our hearts? Do we experience the resurrection and the life? Have we encountered Jesus today and are we encountering Him on a daily basis? Justin Welsby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a similar challenge in a paper presented to General Synod in 2013, entitled “Challenges for the Quinquennium: Intentional Evangelism”.² He opens this document with two Scriptures and a strong statement on the place of evangelism in the life of the church.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45)

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8)

His opening sentence is, “The Church is renewed in evangelism only through being renewed in love for Jesus Christ and love for God’s world.” So it is all about Jesus. Along with the writer of the gospel of Matthew, the apostle Paul, Pope Francis and ++ Justin – we are in good company – it is all about Jesus, capturing and recapturing the joy of our salvation and telling others about our first love – Jesus. It is about resurrection and life. Are we up for that? Are we up for the challenge of telling people about Jesus and the joy of the Gospel in our place and space?

Pope Francis has some great phrases and word-pictures. I particularly like this one:

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light

1 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 1.

2 ++ Justin Cantuar, “Challenges for the Quinquennium: Intentional Evangelism”. GS 1917, Oct 2013.

*born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.*³

Are we Christians who exude the joy of the Lord, not in a super spiritual, soppy self-righteous sort of fashion, but in a fresh and vibrant way, reflecting a vital and real relationship with Jesus, because we know we are “infinitely loved.”

So in this lecture I would like us to reflect on four ideas when we think about and engage in evangelism. They are:

1. As Bishop John Taylor, former Bishop of Winchester, said back in 1972, “Mission [and I would include evangelism, as a vital component of mission]... means to recognise what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in his world and try to do it with him.”⁴
2. Coming to faith is a journey and it can be messy.
3. People in the world have real insights and can teach the church some truths and realities.
4. It is about being with rather than doing for.

3 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 6.

4 J V Taylor, *The Go Between God, The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, (London: SCM, 1972), 37.

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

FROM A THEOLOGY OF THE BALCONY TO A THEOLOGY OF THE ROAD

MISSION (AND EVANGELISM) MEANS TO RECOGNISE WHAT THE CREATOR-REDEEMER IS DOING IN HIS WORLD AND TRYING TO DO IT WITH HIM

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was saying this back in 2003, “Mission, it’s been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in.”⁵ We have heard this said so often now that it has almost become a cliché. Rowan was making a plea for new styles of church life –

Thursday night meeting for young people once a fortnight, the Sunday evening Songs of Praise in the pub, the irregular but persistent networking with the people you met at Greenbelt or Spring Harvest, the mums and toddlers event on Tuesday morning or the big school Eucharist once a term which is the only contact many parents and friends will have with real worshipping life. All of these are church in the sense that they are what happens when the invitation of Jesus is received and people recognise it in each other.

He explained that this is where the

unexpected growth happens and that so often this is from the edges, from the margins; not from the centre. That was the way of Jesus – always on the margins, looking out for the little ones – the children, the women, the blind, the lame, the sick; those who were imprisoned physically or mentally. Jesus brought healing, wholeness and newness of life – salvation – to those on and from the margins. When he came near the centre, he was crucified.

Pope Francis offers a similar challenge:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.⁶

Imagine. Imagine – a skill we need to practise more – imagine if we could do that – rearrange our structures, our timetables, or ways of doing things to suit the world rather than us! This is the missionary impulse. This is the sent-ness of the gospel. This is what the incarnation is all about – being in the world as witnesses so people can become

5 <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1826/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod-york-july-2003>.

6 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evan-gelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 27.

friends with Jesus.

So what might this look like? Let me give you some examples that I hope might inspire you to dream further. I was part of a research project entitled “Beautiful Witness: Practical Theologies of Evangelism in the Church of England” funded by Durham University and the Evangelism Task Group of The Archbishops Council. The project has interviewed eight practitioners, lay and ordained, to ask them what evangelism means and how they engage in evangelism. All of them commented on how important it is to listen to their context. All of them know their contexts well, they live there – a great advantage of the parish system – and they listen to and observe what is going on in their contexts. They are attentive and observant – and they had researched their contexts. They know about levels of unemployment or affluence, housing statistics, demographics, the history of the place, industries and businesses coming and going, the people of influence as well as the underbelly and the unseen and powerless in their places and spaces. Listening, learning and observation - being attentive to the context. How much time do you spend loitering, walking around, getting to know people and places? There is no winning formula, there is no universally successful strategy, no neat typology or paradigm - it is all very contextual. We need to know our contexts and what is appropriate for each context.

They pray and wait for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One woman prayed for a year before initiating anything. John Taylor reminds us, rather acerbically, of our lack of willingness to wait for the Spirit:

But while we piously repeat the traditional assertion that without the

*Holy Spirit we can get nowhere in the Christian mission, we seem to press on notwithstanding with our man-made [sic] programmes. I have not heard recently of committee business adjourned because those present were still awaiting the arrival of the Spirit of God. I have known projects abandoned for lack of funds, but not for lack of gifts of the Spirit. Provided the human resources are adequate we take the spiritual for granted. In fact we have only the haziest idea of what we mean by resources other than human wealth, human skill and human character.*⁷

They all said it is about listening to the Holy Spirit, listening to where the community is at, being where people are, having relationships and discovering where God is already at work in people’s lives. It is about listening to the questions people are asking and as Bishop Graham Cray has put it, resisting “the temptation to turn every tentative question into an excuse to preach the ‘right’ answer, without giving evidence of attentive listening.”⁸

I do not think that the current generation is content with ready-made answers. A recent National Catholic Reporter (USA) editorial asks, “Is it possible that ‘nones’ can teach us something about God? Or at least can we learn something from listening to their questions? The church’s challenge is not to supply answers but to accompany people on their spiritual quests.”⁹ A blog post by Annie Selak, a rector at one of Notre Dame’s dormitories, asked the question, “What do young Catholics want?” her four points all revolve around listening and dialogue. “We want the church to ask the questions we are

7 The Go Between God, 5.

8 Graham Cray, “Foreword,” in Croft, et al., ed., *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), ix.

9 Quoted in S Bevans, “DOING MISSION TODAY: Where We Do It, How We Do It, What We Do” April 18, 2013, delivered to Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Belleville, IL (unpublished), 5.

asking,” she says. These are questions, she explains, that deal with some of the hard issues in today’s world and church. “There is an urgency to these issues, as these are not nameless people on the margins, these are our friends, family members, mentors, and leaders.” This generation of young adults has grown up with non-Christians, and Selak says that they are among “the holiest people we know.” She asserts, “One of the things that draws young people to the Gospel is the inclusivity of Jesus;” and “We want the church to get its hands dirty and be engaged and relevant in our lives, helping us to share this good news throughout the world.”¹⁰

So it is about being engaged, getting stuck in and doing stuff. It is not complicated or difficult - it is just about joining in where God already is. Let me give you some examples. One vicar who was getting to know Mums at the school gate started a group in the community lounge in the school – on a Friday morning after the Mums had dropped their kids at school. They came and had coffee, cake and conversation. She explained that they did not have to cross a threshold – not a spiritual one or a physical one – it was easy for them because this was a place they knew and a time they could manage. The conversations grew out of the questions these Mums were asking.

Another example is a group of young Mums who came together after they had had their first babies and wanted to explore spirituality. They grew very close but it fell apart when their babies became toddlers as it was too difficult to meet. However, a year later when one of the Mums had another baby and had difficulties, they started meeting again, began to pray for one another and set up a children’s church.

One of these practitioners talks about doing mission with “a twinkle in our eye” – so that there is a sparkle or a little joke – and that says something about God. One of her aims is to be out in the public square, to ensure that Jesus is represented in the public space – whether it is the raft race, the carnival, the flower show. She described how for three years they have made and given away non-alcoholic cocktails at the annual flower show. Each year they give their cocktails different names. This year they had names such as life in all its fullness, or forgiveness. So they had people come to their stall in the flower show and ask – “can I have some forgiveness please.” People saw the little joke but it was meaningful for them. The forgiveness cocktail had the flavour of something that is fresh and clean and if they wanted to they could have a conversation about what it means to be forgiven. Brilliant! Something simple, gentle, invitational – representing who God is. It is not about pressurising or pestering people into buying something or signing up to something but rather it is metaphorically enacting something that is true about God and giving them a flavour of Jesus. This is counter to the consumerist culture. Here the church is giving away with no expectation of return modelling a generous God. So whether it is getting involved in English tuition for migrants and refugees, providing chaplaincy for the local chamber of Commerce, joining in a “Favourite Neighbour” award, packing the cupboard and providing the coffee at the local toddlers group, there are a myriad of ways to join in with what God is doing and to model God’s nature. Let me conclude this section with a rather hard hitting quotation from + John Taylor again:

10 <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2013/02/14/the-church-young-catholics-want/16441>

... we need to come off our religious high-horse and get our feet on the lowly, earthy ground of God's primary activity as creator and sustainer of life. We must relinquish our missionary presuppositions and begin in the beginning with the Holy Spirit. This means humbly watching in any situation in which we find ourselves in order to learn what God is trying to do there, and then doing it with him.¹¹

COMING TO FAITH IS A JOURNEY AND CAN BE MESSY

I know journey can be an overused metaphor but this really does seem to be the case today – that it can take people a long time to come to know Jesus. All the practitioners in this research affirmed this – God will meet people where they are at and sometimes it can take a long time for people to come to faith. It can also be messy. One of the practitioners talked about people journeying towards or away from Jesus and for those who are moving away from Jesus, they talk about the old message of repentance and for those journeying towards Jesus, they encourage them to make specific steps such as prayer, reintegration into the community or baptism. In this research it seems that most make this journey because of presence and accompaniment – because people are alongside them helping their lives to be transformed. The stories were not of people coming to faith after hearing an evangelistic sermon – but rather in the context or relationships, being alongside and being a loving presence.

One couple who have been in a tough

context for 17 years, claims that even after people come to Christ, their lives may still be chaotic and difficult. People who suffer from addictions or people in prison, may not be instantly healed of their addictions or bad behaviour. They may still go back and get into fights in their cells or wings, they may still take drugs or suffer from their addictions, but they know they are loved by the outrageous love of God, so their lives ARE different from before. They are given a whole new identity because now they know who they are in Jesus. They gave one very moving example of a young woman who was an alcoholic and became a Christian... but she was still an alcoholic. She made a commitment to Jesus, she talked with God constantly, she was a person of faith and this changed her life hugely... but she was still an alcoholic and eventually it killed her. So this is not glib “come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” No this is a longer, tougher road. Some lives are beyond chaotic so for some this is indeed a longer, tougher journey but they know they have freedom in Christ – some will experience it in this life and others not until they die, but they know they are loved. God is love and Pope Francis reminds us that God is a “Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love [which] means realizing that “he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity”.¹²

Yet, counter-intuitively, they tell of a young man, who as a teenager, was not ready to come to faith. They thought that he had so much going on in his life that he was not ready to come to faith and to deal with all of that in his context. This is a brave and risky opinion to hold – normally we are desperate for people to come to Jesus but they could see that he was not ready. However, they

11 The Go Between God, 39.

12 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 178.

journeyed with him and remained alongside him. They supported him through those difficult years and now that young man is a committed Christian.

God is in the mess – there is treasure in the rubble and when we keep on trying to tidy things up, we may stop the flow and prevent things from happening because God is there, in the midst of the mess, the pain and the trauma. And for this I think we need to ask God for the gift of sight to help us see God there, to see the treasure in the rubble. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit as John Taylor reminds us. The Holy Spirit is the Go-Between God who opens our inward eyes and makes us aware of the other. ‘The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.’¹³

Another practitioner, in a different context, affirmed that when people know they are loved, they can begin to thrive rather than just survive. He spoke of the victim mentality that is a reality in his context where folk walk around with their heads down, refusing to make eye contact. However, he had noticed a difference when people come to faith they would begin to walk around with their heads up because Jesus is in control. Several of the practitioners talked about the work and prayer that was needed for people to free them from shame and feeling that they were useless. This might be in the form of prayer or even courses to restore people’s dignity and to begin build up their identity in Christ. One practitioner spoke of seeing people’s faces change as they embark on this journey.

Several of the practitioners referred to the Parable of the Sower either as preparing people’s hearts to receive Jesus or as not

being able to see the roots grow and that it might take a while for the shoots to become visible.

Let’s just flip this for a moment and think of the journey metaphor from another point of view – that of the evangeliser. We too are called to be pilgrims on a journey and this involves taking risks. This idea is exemplified by what we are told of Abraham in Hebrews 11:4 “By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” Martin Robinson writes,

The need for the church in the West to begin a pilgrimage of discovery concerning its true vocation is urgent. The missionary imagination of the church is best engaged when journey lies at its heart. As one writer puts it, ‘The ship is safest when it’s in port. But that’s not what ships were made for.’¹⁴

Our life of faith begins with an invitation to participate in the *missio Dei* and this is essentially a lifelong pilgrimage. Almost by definition, a pilgrim operates at the margins of a culture – because they are wanderers, on the edge, out of step with the mainstream. Probably most significant changes in cultural life begin at the margins, not at the centre. Listen to these words from Rick Poyner, a professor in design criticism at London’s Royal College of Art:

When you look at the important cultural makers, not just designers, but photographers, film directors, cultural people, over and over they are people who are preserving a position of some kind of independence, being able

13 J V Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, 19.

14 M Robinson, “Pilgrimage and Mission” in C Bartholomew and F Hughes (eds.) *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2004), 176.

*to pursue their own direction, which produces work which is of immense cultural value.... New ideas tend to originate in the margins where those makers are freest.*¹⁵

So what new ideas do you have to evangelise in your context? How is the Holy Spirit calling you to be creative and imaginative to introduce people to Jesus in your place and space? Recently I read a book by Will Gompertz, BBC Arts Editor, entitled *Think Like an Artist... and lead a more creative, productive life*. It sounds like one of those ghastly self-help books doesn't it? Well, I have been recommending it to all my students because I think this is exactly how we should be thinking when we engage in evangelism, church planting, mission. He claims that creative talent is something that we all have – he wants to harness it to help us solve some of the major world issues, I would like to harness it to help us become more effective witnesses. He has ten points – replace artist with witness or evangelist -and they are:

1. Artists are enterprising.
2. Artists don't fail (in other words, they learn from their mistakes and try again.)
3. Artists are seriously curious.
4. Artists steal (good ideas from others).
5. Artists are sceptics.
6. Artists think big picture and fine detail.
7. Artists have a point of view (the good news)
8. Artists are brave.
9. Artists pause for thought.
10. All schools should be art schools (!)¹⁶

One of the practitioners offered this, which picks up some of these ideas, which could almost be a framework for evangelism: love, courage, imagination and activism.

PEOPLE IN THE WORLD HAVE REAL INSIGHTS AND CAN TEACH THE CHURCH SOME TRUTHS AND REALITIES

This is an important and vital truth for us to remember. This was a clear theme among the practitioners interviewed. One reminded us that so often we come thinking we need to tell the truth when sometimes people outside the church know what truth is. One asserted that the world knows that the gospel is about love and sometimes the world needs to remind the church of that because we can be very busy being the church and doing church things. Several spoke of how the church can be perceived as authoritative and hierarchical, preaching at people in an unhelpful way.

Others spoke of how their community helped them to come to faith as well and helped them to “get God differently.” They learned things about God from their communities – it is certainly not a one-way street. This reminded me of a passing remark I heard from a Ugandan lecturer when I was teaching at UCU in 2003. I have never forgotten this comment although it was not one of the main points of his lecture. He was lecturing on what the African churches could offer to the world church in mission. He commented that the first missionaries to Uganda did not see anything of beauty to take with them back to Europe. They had come with everything to give and nothing to receive. Robert Moffatt,

15 Rick Poyner, *Obey the Giant, Life in the Image World* (Architectural Press, 2001), from http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2004/07/new_ideas_origi.html

16 Will Gompertz, *Think Like an Artist... and lead a more creative, productive life*, (London: Penguin, 2015)

a 19th century missionary wrote,

*Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas, Hottentots and Bushmen; leaving them without a single ray to guide them from the dark and dread futurity, or a single link to unite them with the skies.*¹⁷

Really? Sometimes I wonder if we have moved very far from that?!

We do not approach other contexts with a ready-made Gospel and with God in our pocket; rather we go in all humility and gentleness. Max Warren, former General Secretary of CMS, expressed it beautifully,

*Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.*¹⁸

Another image is of entering another's garden where we can learn much from someone else's garden. This can only be done by developing a relationship of trust and respect.¹⁹ How is Christ understood and to be understood in the new context? How might the gospel best be expressed in this new soil? How will the gospel flourish in this new soil? And how may this new soil enhance the understanding and depth of the gospel? One of the key things that was learnt from the reception of Christianity in Africa,

for example, is that it was not what Western missionaries said that mattered in the long-term but rather how African Christians appropriated Christ in ways that made sense to them, utilising African spiritual maps of the universe. This is a lesson for us here and now when we consider evangelism and mission. Are we able to engage in ways that are truly contextual allowing faith communities to flourish in local soil using local spiritual maps? And, conversely, do we find our **own** understanding and appropriation of the faith challenged and enhanced by deep engagement in this particular context?

Are we able to be in the context 'birthing' theological ideas and insights without imposing our own expectations, agendas, assumptions? Are we able to find the treasure that is already there? We need to study local maps with care to find the local treasure. As Bevans and Schroeder remind us, '[we] need to befriend people, engage them as guides, be taught by them.'²⁰ Can we allow the 'locals' to develop their own cartography, their own local maps to make sense of their own particular universe to find their own way home?

So it is about listening and learning, giving and receiving, mutuality and reciprocity. We too need to listen, learn and receive. The practitioners spoke movingly of how important it is to make ourselves vulnerable and to allow people to serve us.

So often in mission and evangelism the receiving person or culture is seen as needy, vulnerable, in need of help. We have to turn this on its head. We need to be in relationship with them and learn to see the resources and spirituality inherent in that community

17 Quoted in D Tutu in "Whither African Theology", in E Fashole-Luke, (ed.) Christianity in Independent Africa, (London: Collins, 1978)

18 Max Warren in J V Taylor, The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Among African Religion, (London: SCM, 1963), 10.

19 S Bevans and R Schroeder, Prophetic Dialogue, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 76.

20 Ibid., 32.

21 J Vanier, Signs of the Times, Seven Paths of Hope for a Troubled World, (London: DLT,2013), 10

and context. Jean Vanier reminds us of this. He writes, 'it will take decades to see all the consequences of listening to the least powerful among us and allowing ourselves to be led by them.'²¹ Vanier again,

*Befriending a person with a disability or alcoholism isn't going to provide an instant solution to their difficulties. But this friendship can lead to a mutual transformation by touching the place where God lives in each one of us. We can then begin to work with people who are fragile instead of simply for them.*²²

IT IS ABOUT BEING WITH RATHER THAN DOING FOR

Andrew Walls reminds us that mission

*... means living on someone else's terms, as the Gospel itself is about God living on someone else's terms, the Word becoming flesh, divinity being expressed in terms of humanity. And the transmission of the Gospel requires a process analogous, however distantly, to that great act on which the Christian faith depends.*²³

Are we able to do this? Are we able to be a winning presence, a witnessing presence, an evangelising presence that can be alongside, can live on someone else's terms and resist the temptation to fix everything and make them like us?

One practitioner asserted that we are not here to do things to people; rather we are here to be alongside people and

to be community with them. Moreover, programmes can be patronising. They can give the wrong message where people see things being done to them and themselves as a worthy project to be fixed, rather than being given the opportunity to grow, offer their own gifts and talents, to give back out of who they are and therefore to begin to flourish.

I recently read Sam Wells' latest book, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, where he claims that the most important word in theology is the word 'with' – Emmanuel – God WITH us. He explains that the story of Scripture is the story of God's desire to be with us, and only within this 'with' can we speak of a 'for.' He claims that we believe that the human predicament is mortality when in fact it is isolation. He illustrates this from the movie *The English Patient* where Laszlo leaves Katherine to seek help while she is dying, whereas she just wants him to be with her at her hour of greatest need. In chapter six he discusses the parable of the Good Samaritan:

*Wells re-reads the parable not as one about how we help those in need, but as one in which we are the person lying in the ditch needing help, and the unexpected stranger saves us. Everything about Christian mission says we go to help others, Wells suggests that Christian mission is about finding out we need to receive the mercy of others.*²⁴

This picks up the previous point that we too are in need of transformation. I think this does challenge our understanding of evangelism. I am not denying that there will need to be explanation, proclamation, invitation but this certainly challenges

22 Ibid., 119.

23 Andrew Walls, "Christian Scholarship and the Demographic Transformation of the Church," in *Theological Literacy for the 21st Century*, eds. Rodney L. Peterson & Nancy M. Rourke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 170f.

24 http://andygoodliff.typepad.com/my_weblog/2015/11/book-review-the-nazareth-manifesto-by-sam-wells.html

some of our methods and approaches to evangelism.

It also touches on how we understand and communicate who God is. We need to deconstruct the idea that God is a patriarchal, vengeful, capricious God who delights in punishment and judgement. For some, this may mean a healing of the imagination. We need to be careful that we do not communicate this understanding, even unwittingly, in our language and structures. If we want to know who God is and what God is like, we need only to look to the Cross. In a paper, "Mission in Britain Today" Steve Bevans urges us to communicate an understanding of God "that inspires and excites."²⁵ A vulnerable God, a patient God and the more "we open ourselves up to this loving, vulnerable, patient God... the more we become ourselves."²⁶ As one theologian has eloquently expressed it, "Jesus is the body language of God."²⁷

Several of the practitioners claimed that the medium is the message. How you share your good news is the good news. Do we do this from on high or we able to be winsome, creative, engaging and involved? We need to live out this message ourselves and preferably in a loving community. It is about God being in the everyday. John Drane maintains that people are more interested in how to live well rather than in heaven or hell or sin. In fact, John Taylor maintains that sin is the last truth to be told and that judgement is best brought about by the activity of the Holy Spirit. He writes, "For the evangelism that proceeds by listening and

learning, entering into another man's [sic] vision in order to see Christ in it, does not start with assertions about sin but waits to be told about it. And usually the truth about sin is almost the last truth to be told."²⁸

Being with and being winsome are much more easily practised and lived out in community. Jean Vanier acknowledged this as a result of his experience of founding the l'Arche communities. He writes, "In years to come we are going to need many small communities which will welcome lost and lonely people, offering them a new form of family and sense of belonging."²⁹ Pope Francis reminds us:

An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives, it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.;... Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time.... Finally, an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization.³⁰

Each of the practitioners interviewed testified to the importance of community which allowed them to take risks, to tell stories, to follow their passions, "to play with God" as one of them put it. They try to find out what God is doing in the context, what is going on out there and that shapes the kind of community they want to be.

25 S Bevans, "Mission in Britain, Some Modest Reflections and Proposals", Holiness, The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge Copyright, Vol I (2015) Issue 2 (Holiness & Mission); 167.

26 Ibid., 169.

27 Mark Oakley quoted in, Reflections for Daily Prayer, (London: Church House Publishing, 2015), 102.

28 J V Taylor, The Primal Vision, Christian Presence Amid African Religion, (London: SCM, 1963), 167.

29 J Vanier, Community and Growth, (NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 283.

30 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, paragraph 24.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude – very briefly. How are we engaged in evangelism? Can we recognise God’s Spirit at work in our contexts and join in with God as winsome witnesses to who God is? Can we allow people’s journey to be messy and are we willing to accompany them along that journey? Do we genuinely believe that we are evangelising in a “graced world”³¹ that has much to teach us also so that we too will be transformed? Finally, are we humble enough, vulnerable enough, de-centred enough to be with rather than doing for? May the joy of the gospel impel us to leave the safety of the balcony and to experience and practise a theology of the road.

31 “Mission in Britain”, 171.

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