

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Fourth of Easter B

15<sup>th</sup> May 2011

1 Peter 2.19-25

John 10.1-10

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Fourth Mark of Mission: To seek to transform unjust structures in society

*'...it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly...if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.'* (1 Peter 2.19-25)

Just at the moment, when we hear or read words about suffering for doing right, we may have a clear picture in our mind's eye, derived from the news media, of protestors in Syria, or some other Middle Eastern country, being beaten up or bundled into vans, to be taken away for torture and detention.

Whilst we can't know the precise motives and inner disposition of each individual protestor, I'm sure that according to our shared lexicon of righteousness, protesting for democratic freedom in a tyranny can only be a good thing. When I hear of some of the appalling treatment being meted out to those protestors, I'm staggered by their courage in turning out, again and again, to put themselves in the way of vicious reprisals.

The fourth mark of mission, according to our Anglican Communion, is when the church seeks to transform unjust structures of society. And there can be no doubt about it that this is something which very often requires real courage. But, as I said at the beginning of this sermon course, something is only a mark of the mission the

church is called to because it's already a mark of the mission God is involved in first. Our Gospel reading today ended with the words; *'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly'* (John 10.10). This is a statement of the church's charter for getting involved in the messy and difficult business of transforming society. Abundant life – that's what God wants for people everywhere; where people experience abundant life, it's a sign of his reign - his rule - his will – penetrating the everyday realities of life on earth. *'Your kingdom come, your will be done...'* we pray. May God's mission be advanced on earth, and may we be part of it.

Some people might want to interpret Christ's promise of abundant life purely spiritually, and say that it's not part of the church's task to campaign for changes in society. They might point out that the epistles in the New Testament, when they talk of the powers at large society, inculcated a fairly passive, even non-critical view of them; *'Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor'* says 1 Peter 2.17, and a better known passage in Romans reads, *'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God...'* (Romans 13.1). It can also be pointed out that abundance of life, in a spiritual sense, is often the mark of people who are most harshly oppressed.

But these are no arguments against our calling to transform the unjust structures of society so far as we are able to influence them. If the early church wasn't a campaigning organisation that must have had a lot to do with the fact that its members were drawn to a great extent from the enslaved or less influential segments of

society. But certain Christian principles were fermenting which would result in huge political and social changes once Christian influence was great enough. Take for example the Roman Games, those vast festivals of barbarity and cruelty: Christians never held with them – indeed, suffered in them; a Christian empire did away with them. Christians who are in a position to have influence cannot split God’s call for righteousness from his concern for justice. And similarly, our concept of abundant life shouldn’t be narrowed down to some ethereal experience which has no relationship with the conditions under which human beings can flourish generally. Justice, freedom, peace – these should all be the concern of both individual Christians and of churches.

This week is Christian Aid week, as the posters around the church proclaim. And Christian Aid is one of many organisations which has discovered that charity is not enough for promoting abundant life. If poverty is to be overcome, people have to have the courage, and summon the energy, to transform the unjust structures of society, and of the world. And sometimes it’s a long, hard, slog.

I don’t know how many of you subscribe personally to Christian Aid, or similar organisations, and perhaps get emails, asking you to take part in campaigning actions – for example contacting your MP about investments by British banks, or the World Bank, in dirty technologies such as extraction from oil tar sands – processes which ruin the environment and the health of poor people who live around them. Or perhaps some of you know the work of the World Development Movement, currently campaigning about the way the futures markets are

pushing up the price of food around the world. There could be European legislation to make what goes on in these markets – and again, the investment of banks in them – more transparent. Or perhaps some of you are members of Amnesty International, and regularly take part in letter-writing actions on behalf of justice for prisoners of conscience all over the world. These are allways of getting involved.

Getting involved in issues like these sometimes feels like doing something courageous – but more often it just feels like working hard to get your mind round complicated issues, making yourself informed, and taking the time in a busy life to *do* something.

We do have on our shelves in the narthex plenty of information from various organisations – including regular Christian Aid magazines which highlight this kind of thing. But I’m not quite sure how often anyone ever stops to read them...

St Mark’s is very good at charity; I also think we’re pretty good at caring, within the sphere we’re immediately conscious of (though Marguerite will have some more thoughts to share about that next week). But what I’ve never been aware of is any sustained conversation or common action which might come under the heading of this mark of mission: seeking to *transform* unjust structures of society. I admire our pattern of having a charity of the month, and I understand the motivation to encourage people to speak about smaller, less known charities on those occasions; but one unintended spin-off from this may be that we don’t pay enough attention to the larger

organisations, which have global or national reach, and are sometimes in the best position to point out where the effectiveness of charity ends, and the work of seeking social and political transformation should begin.

There are churches which have what's called a 'justice and peace' agenda – or at least, a justice and peace group within them. That's fairly typical of Roman Catholic parishes, for example. And one of the advantages of Christians talking about such issues together, and taking action together, is that they give each other the impetus to keep going – not to tire in this essential aspect of mission. And acting together is more powerful. Think of the huge impact Christians had in the Jubilee Campaign for the remission of the debts of the poorest countries; or, more recently, active part that churches, as well as other faith groups, have been playing in the London Citizens' movement, currently campaigning on the subject of a living wage.

This last example points towards another advantage of a church taking on a justice and peace agenda, and making this vision a shared one: it may help its members become less blind to unjust structures of society which need transforming on their own doorstep. Because it's quite easy for nice Christians in nice churches in nice bits of town to feel that everything in the garden around them is rosy – to be totally unaware of things which need challenging and changing very close at hand. I wonder how far that might be true of us?

I spoke earlier in the sermon about how, perhaps, the earliest church didn't seem to campaign to transform

society, because most of its members were too much on the bottom of the heap to do so. The irony is that sometimes, the very fact of *not* being people on the bottom of the heap blinds modern Christians to what they can and should be doing – using our education, or articulacy, our access to modern means of communication, to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Every so often something strikes us as wrong, very wrong, on an individual and perhaps local level – perhaps how a relative or neighbour has been treated badly in hospital, or how vulnerable person has been pushed around in the housing system – but it takes several steps beyond getting annoyed to have the courage to tackle the structures – to attempt some transformation. And if one takes those steps, it's so much easier to do it in company, just as it's easier to address the big national and international issues as part of a group.

Of the five marks of mission, this is perhaps the most difficult one for us. I certainly feel that so far it's been the most difficult to preach about. But I believe it's really important. During June, when an opportunity is advertised for people to get together in a group to dream dreams and make suggestions as to where St Mark's should go with this one, I hope there'll be a good response.

*'I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly'*. Are there things we should be doing together – steps beyond charity – to make this more of a reality for people suffering the effects of structural injustice?