

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

2 of Easter B

1st May 2011

John 20.19-31

First in Series on Five Marks of Mission
Our Calling to Tell the Good News

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. (John 20.21). Words from our Gospel passage.

If you've had a chance to read the May issue of *Seek*, our parish magazine yet, you'll know that this is the first sermon in a series that Marguerite and I are preaching about the 'Five Marks of Mission', which the Anglican Communion has adopted as part of its vision of the church, and as a guideline for local churches as they develop their life. As a parish community, we're going to use these Five Marks of Mission over the course of this summer to help us develop our own 'Mission Action Plan' for the coming three years, just as we've had a helpful Mission Action Plan for the past three years, which we developed by reflecting on the 'Seven Marks of a Healthy Church'.

Well, seven marks to consider last time, and only five marks this time – we should have a simpler job! But the five marks of mission are quite profound, and pretty challenging. I think we'll find plenty to think about, and I hope that our thinking together will stimulate some (literally) inspired ideas to take us forward.

Before the 'Five Marks of Mission' are listed on the Anglican Communion website, there comes a very important statement: *'The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ'*: or, as it's put elsewhere, *'[Mission] is primarily God's Mission.'* It's rather wonderful that today, the day I've chosen to begin this sermon series, the appointed Gospel reading says more or less exactly the same thing: *'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'*. Christ was sent by his Father on mission. After Easter his followers join in. Of course, his immediate followers had already been joining in with Jesus' mission before Easter – but that was with him physically with them - a kind of apprenticeship. But after Easter, those first followers had to move to reliance on a presence which wasn't so immediately obvious – the presence of Christ through his Spirit. But it's important to remember it's still true that we, as members of the church, are called to be missionaries only because God is *already* a missionary – Christ is there before us, wherever we go and whatever we do in his name. We don't have to start something new: We have to find what he is doing, and join in. The practical implication of this is that the mission of the church - of any church – has to start with prayer – lots of it! Prayer to get us in tune with what God's doing, and and wants us to do with him.

The first Mark of Mission is to 'proclaim the Good News'. As our new Bishop of Ely, Stephen Conway puts it, it's about *telling*. (He has words beginning with T for all the five marks of mission – Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure: I'll be referring to them during this sermon course because I really find them a useful mnemonic - but not because I'm generally a devotee of making all points begin with the same letter!)

Proclaiming the Good News – telling the Gospel...it's something so basic, and something we tend to find so difficult. Many Anglicans would much rather leave it to someone else to do that. We like to fall back on the idea that most people in our culture know the good news – know what the Gospel's about – anyway. All we have to do is to create a welcoming community, and hope that one day people around us will want to get in touch with it, and slip back into the faith they've been ignoring for so long. But sadly, that strategy for mission is less and less relevant. We are now into the third generation of children who have never had any real contact with the church. Sunday schools only touch an infinitesimal proportion of the community, and in many places, as in ours, the Sunday School is almost entirely made up of the children of church members. So, we've got to look that fact in the face – there are three generations now where the majority of people have no living experience of the church in their background, and what they learn of Christianity at school may be very sketchy, and definitely have the flavour of looking in on something from the outside – it's just one religion among others, studied as an anthropological phenomenon rather than the living faith of the community. There may be assemblies in school which are supposed to be 'mainly Christian', but I can tell you from experience that in primary schools the supposedly message tends to be a rather general, moralistic one (about being nice and kind – nothing wrong with that, but it sort of misses out salvation, doesn't it?); and in Secondary Schools, where the requirement for mainly Christian assemblies isn't blatantly ignored (which it often is), the sense that assemblies are an induction into a real experience of what worship might be is pretty laughable.

So the churches – that is Christians, you and I – can't rely on any other agency in society to tell the Good News, and certainly not to tell it effectively. People won't become Christians because they think we're nice people – there are plenty of nice people, of all faiths and none: they need to hear a *message* – a message about the compelling character of Christ, and the release he can bring to people from things that deeply, and perhaps secretly, trouble them. I think this may be the real meaning of Jesus' mysterious words to his disciples about their power to forgive or retain sins – either we lay open to people the possibility of having an encounter with Christ which will set them free – or we don't. It's as simple as that – and the responsibility is as great as that.

Of course, there are two aspects to telling the Gospel: one is simply telling the story – making the facts known. I think we have a good record of that at St Mark's. The use of drama here has been a very effective way of presenting the Christian message, over and over again, to a wider community in a variety of very attractive formats. I sincerely hope and expect that this will go on being a big part of our ministry here, along with the films, and other events. And, for something new, those of us who are planning to get involved with 'Open the Book' assemblies in primary schools will be joining in with a movement to make the overarching story of the Bible known to schoolchildren throughout the country in an enjoyable way – again, using dramatic talents.

But there's another side to telling the Good News – and presenting the story is really incomplete without it. And that's the business of people – ordinary people – telling

and showing others what difference the story of Christ makes in their lives. It's the business of forming and nurturing relationships with others in which we're prepared to talk about the *application* of the Gospel message in really down to earth ways, drawing on our own experience. And that's the bit, let's be honest, that we shy away from. For all sorts of reasons.

Fear is one of them – fear of foolishness, fear of rejection, fear of causing offence, fear of social awkwardness. Perhaps even fear of seeing people we're fond of change; in a way, we're used to them not having faith; we can't imagine what they'd be like if they did. We find it hard to trust that the Gospel would make people more fully and freely themselves, the people we love - and not some strange new creatures we'd have to get to know from scratch.

Fear, of course, was part of the experience of the early disciples. Our Gospel reading today introduced them today, locked into a room 'for fear of the Jews' (that is, the religious authorities). Well, we may not fear the religious authorities – we may fear the surrounding secular culture much more; but we're sometimes tempted to huddle up together in our churches, and keep our heads down as Christians when we go out of them. We don't go so far as locking the doors of the church when we're in here – in fact, we'd rather like people to wander in and join us, if they're well-disposed. But some of us may be quite afraid of taking the Gospel out, onto the streets, or into our ordinary conversations.

I'll be honest, when Gill Kelly told me that she and a friend were putting on a Newnham Nativity in the streets, I was afraid they might meet quite a lot of hostility from some people in the community. Much safer to keep that kind of thing in church. But, in the end, it was a triumph, and much better received than I had dared imagine. Our local Police Community Support Officer who was there directing traffic made it clear to me that she was moved by it. If it was only that one person that it touched, then it would have been worthwhile – but I expect there were others. But that event – like all the ones we have in the church building – needs you and I to take up the conversation with people, to open a dialogue about what this story means for life – for my life, your life, their life – if it's to be really fruitful. And this is why I said in my report to the APCM that relationships are really the most important channel for sharing the Gospel – over and above events, sermons and presentations. I wasn't undervaluing those things: I was trying to say (perhaps not very well) that those things need to be set firmly in the context of personal relationships and conversations. Events, plays, sermons and services can help the Christian content of those conversations a great deal; but they're not a substitute for personal, risky and real witness to what Jesus Christ means to us, his followers, now.

So that's also the background to something else I said at the APCM: my observation that at our last excellent event, 'The Bible in Voice and Verse', during the interval it seemed that every St Mark's person, including myself, was talking to someone else from the church. We weren't (so far as I could see) trying to build on the fact that people had walked through our doors, to get to know them – to

form new friendships, to discuss how we and they felt about what we were seeing and hearing.

In the simplest sense, as Christians, although we don't want to be 'ramming the Gospel down people's throats' in some cringe-worthy and insensitive manner (we all know the kind of Christian we don't want to be like) but we do need to be looking for opportunities to talk – sharing some of our doubts and questions, just as much as our certainties and convictions. We need to make real friendships, not phoney ones – but that doesn't preclude making those friendships for the sake of Christ, our own best friend. Wanting, sincerely, to bring more people into his circle of friends.

Tough, isn't it? Many of us are introverts, or a bit shy. Lots of us feel tongue-tied about our faith, even among our Christian friends, let alone our non-Christian ones. Some of us are worried about the spiritual opposition being cleverer than we are. No wonder we'd like to think that sharing the Gospel is someone else's job, not ours. We'd like to think that living Christianly, and being welcoming in church, was enough. But I don't think it will wash. Jesus said, '*as the Father sent me, so I send you*' to a group of people which must have included all kinds of personality types, as well as abilities. And he didn't apparently make any exceptions.

But this is where I come back to my first point. We're not expected to do this in our own strength. And when we reach out in mission, we join in with Christ himself, who's still reaching out into the world by his Spirit. We may even

find he's cleared the way for us and for our halting witness, if we only take the risk of giving it.

And if we want to know how to join in with what he's already doing, prayer really is the best starting point – the prayer which is the breath of the Spirit in us uniting us with the Father and the Son as they work in the world. As individuals, we could each pray regularly and frequently about who we can and should speak to about our faith – praying for really appropriate opportunities, and the alertness and courage to overcome our inhibitions and take them. Perhaps we could also make a practice of praying regularly for – say – three specific people who don't know the joy of faith; perhaps one person who is really close to us, one who is a friend, and one who is a colleague, or someone we know through some community group or other we take part in. We could try to pray consistently that they will come to know God – and that, if it's his will, we may be part of that process.

And, as a church, over this summer, we'll be asking some of you to meet in a group and think hard about how we, communally, could more effectively tell the Gospel in order to present ideas to an open meeting. I've booked to go to a conference in June and may come back with some new ideas; but home-grown ideas, especially those arising from real prayer and wrestling with the issue, will almost certainly be the most valuable.

People need God – even people who seem to have everything without him. I'm sure of that. I hope you share that conviction, too. If you do, listen to Jesus' words -

ponder and pray them through: *'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'*