

Sermon Series Five Marks of Mission.

22.01.17 Second Mark of Mission: To Teach, Baptise and Nurture New Believers.

Introduction

Last week there was a visitor to the cathedral who said that he just wanted to come into the cathedral to get warm and if possible to have a cup of coffee. A reasonable request I thought and one to which I readily acquiesced. It was just after the early morning Eucharist so I went off to change my robes and when I returned to the Chapter House there was our visitor holding forth in a very unflattering way about the God of the bible. He criticised the church for trying to sanitize chunks of scripture where the deity is clearly depicted, or so his argument went, in a tyrannical and uncaring light.

Clearly, our visitor was already feeling much warmer and what's more he had finished his coffee so, since his opinions had cleared the Chapter House of most of his audience, it was suggested that he should follow suit, or at least take himself off to the west end of the cathedral where he could sit quietly. I later found him stretched out on half a dozen chairs by the west doors where, with more than a gentle sound of snoring, he slumbered through Choral Eucharist and, I'm sorry to say, missed Canon Martin's excellent introduction into the sermon series on the five marks of mission!

Between now and the end of February we shall be focusing on each of the five marks. We began last Sunday with the first mark which is: *to*

proclaim the good news of the kingdom. And Canon Martin warned us to be cautious, for ‘mission’ can be something of a slippery term, with plenty of scope to get it wrong – he referred to a rather unfortunate equine experience that left him parting company from his mount with more than a sore gluteus maximus.

What the five marks attempts to do is identify five ways of seeing the church’s task in the world. One of these tasks is to *teach, baptise and nurture new believers*. Which is what I want to say something about this morning.

Mission includes evangelism. And evangelism, for the Christian Church, is about witnessing to the reconciling love of God; making known his saving purposes through the good news of the gospel; witnessing principally by becoming “living members of Christ’s earthly community”, called to be part of “a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit”. (Bosch, D, Transforming Mission.) If we are called to teach, baptize and nurture new believers what is it we want to teach?

Last Week’s Visitor

I want to take us back to comments from our visitor last week. His thinking you see resonates with a controversy early on in the life of the Church that attracted much attention at the time. The controversy concerns a man named Marcion. He was a very active Christian missionary and church leader in Rome in the second century, and he had strong views about the Old Testament and its god. He didn’t think that the Old Testament should be Christian Scripture at all; and he didn’t

think that the god of the Old Testament was the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Marcion's approach was to discard what displeased him, to edit the New Testament down. He felt that the only gospel that suited his canon was the one according to St Luke - though not without exercising some editorial licence. He accepted Paul's letters but purged these also of anything that gave priority to the Judaic Law which he saw to be in conflict with good news of Jesus. He shaped "from the residue, a form of Christian piety, shorn of its contradictions, a testament as he saw it (dedicated) to the pure love and compassion of Jesus Christ". (Tilby, A. Marcionism: can Christians dispense with the God of the OT? In Heresies and how to avoid them. [Eds] Ben Quash and Micael Ward.)

The problem though was that there was no room in his thinking for the story of faith to represent the more nuanced layers of meaning, or give recognition to the way that the whole corpus of scripture might be saying something also about a gradual maturing of faith through light-bulb, epiphany moments, illuminated finally by the light and life of Jesus making known the depth and wonder of God's saving purposes. What we learn from the controversy concerning Marcion is the attempt to disengage with the God of the Old Testament and to smooth over the messy bits – the bits of faith we find challenging – yet we need to remember that it is precisely from the mess and chaos that this good news story of Jesus is told bringing light to former ways of thinking. Let me give an example.

Baptism

St Mark opens his gospel, more or less, with the adult Jesus wading into the Jordan to be baptised by John. Then comes the image of the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove; and the invocation “This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased”. Reflecting on that story it wouldn’t take long for the first generation of Christians to begin making a connection with the opening story in Genesis 1, with the Spirit of God hovering, brooding, over a great watery chaos, his creative breath bringing light and life to bear upon the world. And here, at the start of Mark’s gospel, the water – the spirit – the voice – there is something stirring, something that is about to break upon the world and alter things irrevocably.

It’s curious too that when Jesus reflects on his baptism he likens it to his passion, as if this chaotic part of human story was what he was meant to be dipped, or immersed in. So now when we look into the waters of baptism, what we are meant to see is Christ’s transforming grace overcoming the chaos of human sin and sorrow. This at least is St Paul understanding when he writes:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6: 3-4)

By baptism we are immersed in all that has been accomplished through Christ’s paschal mystery - lifting the low estate of our humanity before his eternal throne of grace. The sacrament of baptism then becomes the vision of a new creation not by trying to smooth over the

mess of our human condition, nor by editing out the bits that seem to contradict, or confuse our understanding of our heritage of faith, but rather by trusting that in Christ we become part of a new creation drawn into a deeper understanding of the world Christ comes to redeem.

By bringing us closer to the heart of the church, baptism is bringing us closer to the heart of God. But not as a form of Christian piety shorn of its contradictions and challenges but called to be part of a living community, actively engaged in “a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit”.

Conclusion

When Jesus stood by the sea of Galilee and called two sets of brothers Peter and Andrew, James and John to follow him. His call to them meant literally following behind, copying his whole pattern of life and, by doing so engaging in the life of the kingdom that Jesus came to announce. They were to become fishers of men and women. They were in the words of one commentator ‘formed, conformed and transformed’ into the pattern of Christ. What we learn from this is that the purpose of teaching, baptizing and nurturing is not intended to lead people into the heart of the ecclesial life of the church and no further, but into the very heart of Christ’s mission. And it is there that we leave it today, looking ahead to the continuation of our series next week when we consider the third mark of mission which is: *to seek to transform unjust structures of society and to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.*

Let us pray

Hengrave Prayer

Lord Jesus, your sign of reconciliation is the Cross in all its breadth and length and height and depth.

Teach us to share it with you and our sisters and brothers so that we may learn to act justly, to walk humbly, to love tenderly, and so, waiting upon the Spirit, become instruments of your peace, to the glory of God the Father.