

Marks of Mission

The Third Mark - to seek to transform unjust structures of society

Before he was sworn in, as President, on the steps of the Capitol, Donald Trump went to church. He went to St. John's Episcopal Church for a private service. Every president since Franklin Roosevelt has done that (with the exception of Richard Nixon in 1973). Mr. Trump is a Presbyterian, but his invited preacher was The Rev. Robert Jeffress from the First Baptist Church in Dallas. Mr Jeffress campaigned for Trump and is a member of his evangelical advisory board.

As I said, the sermon was private, but Jeffress sent out a tweet telling us he was going to preach on the theme 'When God chooses a leader'. Jeffress said that Mr Trump put him in mind of another great leader who had never been a politician. God, he said,

chose a builder whose name was Nehemiah. And the first step of rebuilding the nation was the building of a great wall.

God loves walls, apparently. Mr Jeffress went on to talk about Nehemiah's persistence and added

President-elect Trump, you, Vice President-elect Pence, and your team have been called by God and elected by the people to do a great work. It is a work far too important to stop and answer your critics.

'Called by God', 'God's work, too important to interrupt...'. This morning we have some work to do, there is a tricky ground to cover: God and politics. It is important, it is topical, and it is not going away. It is in front of us this morning because I have to preach on the third of the five *Marks of Mission* 'to seek to transform unjust structures of society'. We have a lot of ground to cover and I am going to have to move quite fast. If you could just tighten your theological seat belts please, there may be some turbulence.

The *Marks of Mission* tell us what Mission is supposed to look like. So, they tell us, mission includes preaching and proclaiming; mission is teaching and nurturing and, this morning, mission includes changing the way people live, challenging injustice. Oddly, the Marks of Mission do not tell us the one thing we really *must* know about Mission. Think of the word mission and you think of the slightly alarming people you might want to avoid at a party. 'He was a man with a mission'. Mission makes us think of human agency, the things I do, and you do: 'she was on a mission'. Missionaries, we think, go and do things to other people. And now we are in trouble. It is not up to us; it is really not up to us. Thank God, it is not up to us.

Mission is what God does. God is a God who pours himself out, theologians will tell you that God *proceeds*. If you have come to the cathedral before you already know that; you have actually made that point yourself. If you have been at this service before, you have declared that God *proceeds*. It is in the creed: the Holy Spirit who *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. The Father begets the Son and the Spirit proceeds from them. God communicates himself, that is fundamentally what God's nature is all about - pouring out in love. God *is* mission and we join in. We get mission badly wrong when we think it our enterprise or even that God needs our help. Rowan Williams used to make this point and

now you can't go anywhere in the Church of England without hearing someone quote him. 'Mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in'.

So, in passing, we might want to question Mr Jeffress, or Mr Trump, and ask 'How do you know this is God's work?' 'When you talk of walls and torture, ask how this joins in God's work?' I am sorry Mr Jeffress; I think Mr Trump does need to answer his critics.

So then, what is God's mission? There's a rather neat little saying by one of the Church Fathers that takes a minute or two to learn but a lifetime to understand. It is Clement of Alexandria and

just as God's will is creation and is called the world, so his intention is salvation, and it is called the Church.

What he means is that God is a God who creates, that is God's nature. Remember, God *proceeds*. Before God does anything else, God pours out love. But that love has a direction and the aim is that we will love God back, the aim is salvation. This is tricky stuff. There are PhDs in doctrine for people who talk about these things at sherry parties. Let me put it another way. There comes a day, every now and then, when Mrs Hoyle decides that the kitchen must be cleaned; really cleaned. She wills that the kitchen will be clean and that determination takes over, it defines her. She cannot be deflected, coffee is left untouched, the door is not answered and the cat hides upstairs. Mrs Hoyle, and what she wills, become one and the same thing. But all this will power has an intention. This is done because Mrs Hoyle believes in having a home, a place where you feel comfortable, she *intends* that we will have a home where people can come and enjoy dinner. So Mrs Hoyle *wills* one thing and *intends* another. And, in that sense at least, Mrs Hoyle is rather like God. It is just unfortunate for Mrs Hoyle that the whole business of having people for dinner will mess up the kitchen again.

God's will is creation and is called the world, so his intention is salvation, and it is called the Church

Clement, God bless him, is saying something really important and we must hear it. Christians sometimes talk as though the whole point of having faith is that it is a sort of *Get out of jail* card. The point is to escape, to get to heaven. The idea seems to be that the world and other people are wicked and we are looking for something else. Clement is clear, *God's will is creation and it is called the world*. God's very nature is poured out in love and it is called *the world*. And then the aim is salvation.

Do you see? The point is that God's mission, and therefore our mission, is directed here, just here in the world around us. We are running out of time. So, let's gallop through things we do know. When Jesus comes amongst us, what does he preach? He preaches a *Kingdom*. *Repent and believe*, he says, *the Kingdom of God has come near* (Mark 1:15). The very heart of Jesus' preaching is that we will live together in peace with God and one another. He preaches community, when he heals lepers and the possessed he sends them back to their community, he does not tell them to pray, he rebuilds relationship. He tells of Samaritans being kind to Jews, he talks to pagan Roman Centurions, he eats with sinners. It is the social miracle. And when the very alarming Book of Revelation imagines the destruction of wickedness and the world it then turns and imagines the city of God

descending from heaven. It is back to what we knew. The city is Jerusalem, the world as we knew it, made perfect.

Scripture tells a story of creation that begins in the first book, Genesis, and reaches perfection in the last, Revelation. And scripture tells another story a defining story for Jews and Christians. In that story God's people live in a land of plenty, in Egypt. The ruler in that land fears famine and slowly it becomes not a place of plenty, but a place of poverty. There are not enough resources, the people are made slaves and ultimately sent to make bricks without straw. The story is about the injustice and the abuse of power. Then Moses leads the people out of slavery and into promise. Pharaoh's power, which was all about need and shortage, is replaced by the power of God which is generous and rich.

The story gets played out again and again in the writings of the prophets. Listen to them and you will hear them crying out in despair and outrage at the injustice and the loss that surround them, the world is not what it should be

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light...
Jeremiah 4:23

That is the voice of Jeremiah and it is a terrible cry of anguish. He thinks God's will is frustrated, creation, what God wills, is going backwards

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light...

The prophets know what the world should be, understand God's intention and weep over what they see instead

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!
Jeremiah 8:22 - 9:1

What we read in scripture is passionate commitment to the world. Passionate despair at injustice

The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths... Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness... Isaiah 59:8-9

That was Isaiah he knew about injustice and passionate despair, but he also had a passionate hope.

Thus says God, the LORD... who spread out the earth and what comes from it... I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as... a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon... Isaiah 42:5-7

Hear that, God creates – spreads out the earth – and God saves brings out the prisoners. It is just what Clement of Alexandria told us to expect

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The preaching of social justice is not the tedious bleating of Guardian reading clergy, it is the voice of the prophets and Christ's call to live in the Kingdom. The mission of God is salvation *in the world*. Injustice is an offence against God and a fundamental evil, it frustrates God's purpose. Here we preach the gospel of God, we preach justice. And we do, and we will, defy anyone who wants us to believe in something else.