

A sermon preached at Worcester College, Oxford

The fourth Sunday of Easter

Sunday 12th May 2019

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Acts 11: 1–18

Christian mission is both an historical curiosity and a theological category and the latter is often clouded by the former and, just to lay out the complexity at the start, since most organisations nowadays boast a 'mission' (this very institution I hazard!), the Church's mission may be judged by standards which are assuredly not its own. I once, as a callow youth lived and worked on a physical 'mission' in Zululand in South Africa in the wicked days of apartheid – indeed a distinguishing feature was that it was one of the few places in the Republic where the writ of apartheid – separate development – did not run and those of different 'races' as they were chillingly described, could live and mix under the same roof. The mission boasted the full complement of Christian endeavour; school, church, convent, conference centre, hospital and a farm for employment. But although guided by generous instincts which were not those of the repressive regime, photographs of white bishops being carried on uplifted thrones suggests to me now that something more complicated was going on.

It is a byword that the Spanish conquistadors in all but name enslaved the indigenous people of the Americas and of course decimated the population by introducing unknown diseases. But the Spanish could not tolerate human sacrifice and in the name of Christianity stamped it out. The British in India by contrast did not claim a specifically Christian purpose (although perhaps many would have owned a 'civilising' one); indeed the East India Company banned missionaries for its first two centuries. For there is evidence that some colonial administrators were nervous of native exposure to the Magnificat with its talk of bringing down the powerful and raising the lowly – one should perhaps be encouraged when some people actually understand the Faith. Notwithstanding which it is also believed that part of the motive behind the Indian Mutiny (aka the first Indian War of Independence) of 1857 was a conviction that newly arrived evangelical British clergy were about to convert the population to Christianity by force. Christians remain a tiny minority but the practice of widows self-immolating on the funeral pyres of their husbands was outlawed by the British.

The story of the conversion of Cornelius and others is a pivotal part of St Luke's volume 2 – the Acts of the Apostles. Not only is the story laid out, but for additional effect we have, and have just heard, Peter's account of it being presented for discussion by the apostles in Jerusalem – Peter (not Paul who had the Gentiles in his sights), almost incredulously concludes that the mission of Christ belongs not just to the Jews, the object of all true saving favour, but to the Gentiles and without any exception. The account of Peter's vision is reckoned to be foundational; indeed what precedes tonight's passage has to some suggested a shift from repentance to a theology of universal forgiveness and we are free to wonder if this is perhaps the culture and pattern of preaching out of which the Gospels (and not just Luke) emerged.

Luke as a historian is plainly suggesting that this – the saving Christ – is not a turn of Hebrew culture but rather is normative for a new historical order.

The question of how Christians regard people of other faith and of none is of more than historical interest and is perhaps unusually difficult to navigate when exclusive claims to salvation through Christ are still current. It might be taken that a settled view – espoused at Canterbury and Rome – is that other religions are far from demonic or heathen, have wellsprings of wisdom and can lead to gracious acts; they are worthy objects for respect and collaboration. Mission amongst the Jews is rare and has seldom been successful. Oliver Cromwell gets the credit for allowing Jews back into these islands and for supposedly commercial reasons – in fact he also espoused a form of Christianity which insisted that unless the Gospel was preached to the Jews there could be no Second Coming of Christ. Peter's vision leads him to think that Gentiles might be Christian but not conversely that Jews are unlikely to be; although the abandonment of food taboos surely made that problematic.

The Church of England is currently absorbed by 'mission'; every document and every conversation requires a nod to this totem. It was at one stage suggested to me that to access ancient monies to restore my Christopher Wren tower (his largest and most ludicrous) I would need to prove how it might assist the mission of my parish. This concept which enjoys such currency is of limited imaginative reach and seems to involve the creation of new patterns of Christian community unconcerned with historic liturgy, iconography and culture (let alone Evensong!) and with a recourse to an exclusivist theology of salvation. That of course is my shorthand and may be treated as a parody. It seems to me as I enter the home straight of active ministry that this is not much more than a last throw of the dice and that the abandonment of Christian cultural norms in favour of an accessible spirituality will neither feed individuals nor change society.

At the same time the Church is pressing with vigour a repair of its neglect of diversity and especially as it relates to sex (or gender) and ethnic origin; although it continues to maintain a dishonest fudge about sexuality which is destined to confuse and frustrate this generation. To hold mission and diversity together seems to require a consistent and thoroughgoing anthropology. A concept of mission which is ultimately little more than the sifting of the confessional from the unbelieving is an endorsement of a view of human nature which is divisive and not diverse. If that is all mission is, then it could readily become the handmaid of the monoculturalism which is the new scoundrel of extreme politics. Disturbingly it is those most convinced by the 'mission' agenda who are least enlivened by diversity – an inconsistency which I hazard will prove unsustainable.

Arguably Peter's vision is one of multiculturalism, although he would have had a limited grasp of other cultures. There have been experiments at least as successful as our own. Muslims lived in Spain from the 8th to the 15th century and for many who follow Islam today, this is the period of greatest pride and hence deepest regret. In the early 10th century a Caliphate was declared in Cordoba, a city destined to sport a population of 500,000 including not just Muslims but Jews and Christians (some of them seeking refuge from the Church as heretics). It is

fashionable nowadays, when there is a certain nervousness abroad about the success of our multi-culturalism, to advance a view of the Caliphate of Al Andalus as a period of extraordinary toleration and mutual cultural enrichment. If they could do it then, why should we not today?

Muslims are said to have offered to Jews and Christians dignity and protection and while by no means financially or socially equal to Muslims, yet they often enjoyed liberty and prosperity unparalleled elsewhere. But for every scholar who proposes a picture of toleration and protection there are others who decry this as unhistorical, and who point to pogroms and periods of persecution of Jews and Christians. What we might call 'multi-culturalism' has in Spain the rather more attractive name of 'La Convivencia', literally 'co-existence' or more simply 'living together'

And Peter's sheet with its cornucopia of meat and the injunction to 'kill and eat' raises its own problems for us today; although not everything listed was in fact unclean to Jews. But the unsustainability of meat rearing and the precariousness of fish stocks raises a new hazard for theology and debate. You heard it first here; when issues about the inclusion of women and issues about human sexuality have been laid to rest in the Church, the next issue to debate and divide will be the eating of meat or otherwise. There will be pescatarian parishes, vegan deaneries, carnivorous bishops, and perhaps vegetarian colleges – you wait!

For my part I obey a stricture of Diarmaid McCulloch, of this University – that the Churches' failure seriously to defend the Jews from the Holocaust means we should be cautious about what we say for perhaps a hundred years.