

Preaching On International Missions: A Third World View

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The very term "international missions" bears witness to a seachange which has overtaken the Church's thinking on its missionary mandate. Up to fairly recently it was still possible to speak of the mission of the Church as "foreign" and "overseas." "Mission" conjured up exotic images. It suggested "far-away places" and "strange-sounding names." It referred to people whose religious beliefs seemed to be mere superstitions, whose culture was demonstrably inferior, and whose customs were manifestly primitive. For these the Gospel was specially prepared, and to them the zeal of missionaries was specially directed.

The international community was neatly divided between a Christendom which was bathed in light, a Jewry which was shrouded in a kind of dapple-grey and the rest of the world shut up in gross darkness. Christendom included Europe and Euro-America, Southern Africa, and Australia. Here was the missionary base, and from these areas heroic souls fared forth, armed with the Gospel and a superior culture to turn the rest of the world from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.

To preach on missions in those palmy days of Christian triumphalism was not difficult. On the contrary, it was the most exhilarating and exciting feature of the Church's witness to the world. Great halls were thronged as these heroes returned and reported on their exploits. Emotions were profoundly stirred on learning of the "great doors and effectual" as well as of the "many adversaries." The Great Commission of Matthew 28 triggered the enthusiastic response of the young with a thirst for adventure and instant success, as well as the not-so-young who found a worthy cause to which they could devote their munificence.

The missionary context was sharply defined. It was the universal hunger for the Word of God, the intoxicating vision of the evangelization of the world in one generation, and the urgency based on the impending Parousia, a prelude to which was the proclamation of the Gospel to all the nations.

There is no doubt that such sentiments still persist in most congregations. There are still Christians who are able to work themselves up into a state over the three billion souls who are destined for damnation because they have not yet heard the glad tidings of peace. There are still those who wax nostalgic over the glory that has departed and who secretly wish that the hands of the clock could be turned back to the good old romantic days when the missionary task of the Church was not complicated by anti-western propaganda, by third-rate leaders of the Third World in both Church and State, and by communist agitators.

There are, however, others in the congregations who are more questioning. Some of these have travelled abroad whether on business or for pleasure and, having travelled, their eyes have been opened. They have discovered for themselves, and at first hand, that the half was never told. They did not expect to find what they found. They were not aware that, in most parts of the world, the transition from mission to Church had already taken place; that, in those areas to which they were contributing their missionary offerings, there were already Synods and Assemblies over which local divines presided, and that Churches were growing at a faster rate than in the days when the missionaries held sway. They probably discovered other things. They might have sensed tensions between missionaries and local Church leaders which could at times turn vicious, and which centred mainly on the devolution of authority, the sharing of economic power, and the disparity of life-styles. They also sensed a kind of alienation of these Churches from the local culture. They saw the local leadership affect the trappings, the graces, and even the twang of their foreign colleagues. They wondered at the stately edifices, the stained glass-windows, the electronic music, and the unwieldy bureaucracy, all of which were economically crippling and all of which their missionary gifts were supposed to subsidize. They returned chastened in mind and spirit wondering whether, when all was told, the game was worth the candle, and whether those three billions were all that badly off in time, whatever might be their destiny in eternity. They too will be in the congregations.

And because we are now living in a world of easy travel and rapid communication, the congregations will include, more and more, those Christians who have come from "heathen lands afar," and whose presence is like the chickens come home to roost. They too will be having their rude awakening. They will be discovering that the places from which their missionaries came are neither Hephzi-bah nor Beulah, that the United States is not the Kingdom of God on earth, that only a minority of the population attend Church, and an even smaller percentage actually believe the Gospel. And like the naughty boy who ran away to Scotland, they'll stand in their shoes and they'll wonder. They will see crude forms of materialism which overturn the Sermon on the Mount and put the seeking of the Kingdom of God after the acquisition of the other things which the gentiles seek. They will see the unity of God's people caricatured by the segregation of the Churches along racial lines. Having succumbed to the bombardment of their practice of polygamy as wrong, they will marvel at the polygamy by stages through the widely utilized facility of the divorce-courts. They will see vice, murders, abandonment of infants, abortion on demand, drug-addiction, prostitution, homosexuality, and rape to an extent which they never thought was possible. They will see a hedonism and an unhappiness, a cynicism and a despair, an insecurity and a restlessness which suggest a society on the brink of collapse. They will also discover that the Ku-Klux is not the only Klan but only the most extreme expression of a clan-mentality which pervades the whole society.

They, too, will be listening to the Missionary Sermon and will be wondering what they let themselves in for when they believed the Gospel. They will understand a little better why the coming of the missionaries and the preach-

ing of the Gospel resulted in the fracturing of their communities, discord in their families, an alienation from their culture, and a new tribalism; and they will wonder whether Jesus' warning about the Scribes and the Pharisees and their making of proselytes is all that antiquated or remote from their social or personal experience.

And then there is the preacher — and whether he or she be liberal or fundamentalist, neo-orthodox or radical an unease will increase as the moment arrives for the preparation of the Missionary Sermon. Preachers will be aware that their lines have fallen in pleasant places. Their ways are pleasantness and their paths are peace. They are not of the three billion unsaved and they are not the wretched of the earth. They preach the Gospel, and they make it fairly well living off the Gospel. The ox certainly is not muzzled as it treads the corn. But as they search the Scriptures, they also read the newspapers. They listen to the radio. They watch the television, and they will have that gut-feeling that something is tragically wrong with the world, wrong with the Church, and probably wrong with the Gospel. "My God!" they will exclaim in anguish, "this is two thousand years of preaching the Gospel, of making converts, of founding Churches which have prospered in many parts of the world, not least this part of the world. Another millenium is about to run its course, and yet look at the state of the world? It is just as if no one has believed the report, to no one has the arm of the Lord been revealed, and there is no faith in the earth. What has this great Christian democracy done *for* the poor of the earth in comparison to what it has done *to* them? Who has not been exploited? Who has not been oppressed? Who has really taken seriously the legitimate aspirations of the poor and their cry for justice? How has the wealth of the nations (including my wealth) been acquired, and at what cost in terms of human values? What is happening to us that we seem able to live with ourselves in this situation?"

Once these questions are raised, the Missionary Sermon is well on its way or the preacher will begin to look for another job. For he or she will discover that the need is not for more mission but for more prophecy. The need is for more prophets in all the nations and to all the nations, men and women who are prepared to put their lives and livelihood at risk not for any romantic adventure to remote parts of the earth, but because of their own integrity and their captivity to the word of God.

Prophecy as Mission

Prophecy is mission. Indeed, it is the indispensable pre-requisite to preaching about mission today, and it is urgent that the prophetic ministry be recovered in the Churches. It is this alone which will offer to those engaged in the Church's mission of witness and service a respite from the over-preoccupation with institutional demands, the obsession with statistics and the delusion of success-stories, and enable them to subject these ventures and achievements to radical interrogation and evaluation in the light of the word of God.

This is, as it has always been, the primary mission. The prophets of Israel were men whom Yahweh *sent* on a mission, "rising early and sending them" — to use Jeremiah's pregnant phrase. In the same spirit, both John the Baptist

and Jesus of Nazareth knew themselves as men who were sent by God. In the same spirit the earliest apostles were sent. The Church in the power of the Holy Spirit was a prophetic witness. It still is. In every age God continues his own peculiar mission in the world by raising up his servants, the prophets whom he calls and sends in his name, to speak his word to all the nations. It is this freedom in God and obligation to God which rescues the preachers from the dangers of time-service as men-pleasers, just as it rescues the Church from the irrelevance of being a mere earthly institution, which determines its priorities and measures its success by standards which it has set for itself, and inspires it to risk failure, rejection, calumny, and persecution for the Kingdom of God.

Prophets are persons who have been exposed to the purposes of God. They have been taken into the (sod) secret counsel of God. Their ears have been opened. Their eyes have been enlightened. Their hearts have been enlarged and their tongues have been unloosed. Their mission is to disturb complacency as their own complacency has been disturbed, to explode myths, to de-bunk illusions and to subvert pride. At heart they are exiles. They have no Church, no country, no culture, only the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. They are both free and compelled to cry "Woe" even on institutions which they cherish dearly, even as once in the presence of God they cried "Woe is me!" Out of that encounter no programme is exempt, no institution sacrosanct.

When, therefore, the preacher contemplates a sermon on mission, he or she must first and foremost take account of his or her own prophetic mission. A Voice will be heard saying "Cry!" provoking the question "What am I to cry?" and the only reply will be "All flesh is as grass and all beauty as the flower of the field, and the grass will wither and the flower will fade but Yahweh's word will keep rising up forever" (Is. 40:6-8).

The Church in the World

From this perspective the preacher will reflect on the Church throughout the world; and the fact that one era of the missionary enterprise has come to a close will be accepted without apology or regret. Churches have now come into maturity where there were once mission-outposts, and the implications of that change are momentous. It means that Europe, Euro-America, and Eurasia no longer hold a monopoly on the Christian inheritance nor is the missionary calling their exclusive prerogative. This should be cause for rejoicing. It means that the earlier era was a success. As a result the Church has returned to Africa, it has revived in Asia, and it has been diversified and enlarged in Latin America. Furthermore, in those continents, the movement of Christianity has acquired its own momentum. In some areas the rapid growth of the Church is unparalleled in history. As these Churches shed the baggage of Western culture and incorporate the rich inheritance of their own cultures, as they move into dialogue with their neighbours of other faiths and ideologies, the many-sided wisdom of God is revealed and the Christian tradition is broadened and deepened.

The change is therefore as qualitative as it is quantitative. For it is out of these new Churches that creative theological insights are emerging, and new and meaningful ways of speaking about God are being disclosed as through intensive engagement with their own social, economic, political and cultural environment his presence and power are made known. Thus it is not in those Churches that the Death-of-God has been announced. It is not there that Christianity is in decline. It is not there that there is an erosion of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The new era is marked by a definite shift in the centre of gravity. As the Church is growing in the Third World so it is declining in the West and, the less westernized the new Churches, the more phenomenal the growth. The preacher will therefore pause awhile to ask where are the new mission-fields and who are the ones who are (or better still who are not) in a missionary situation. He or she will ask whether it suffices to equate a missionary situation with a depressed economy, a low standard of living, or the prevalence of western culture. The preacher will then look out of the study-window and see the fields white unto harvest. There will also be awakened a sense of urgency equal to the expectation of the Parousia in that the cup is already overflowing, the hour-glass is already spent, and time is short. The preacher will then consider his or her calling afresh.

International Relationships

One of the questions which will agitate the preacher is how has this strange turn of affairs happened. How is it that the last has become first and the first last? How is it that those who first believed seem further off from the Kingdom than these latter-day disciples? How did the hardening of the heart (and of the arteries) come about? And, if only by instinct, the conclusion will be reached that this turn of affairs did not happen overnight or by chance, but is somehow related to the long history of international relationships in which the Church, in its various missionary enterprises, also participated. The world is round, and (as the saying goes) what goes around must come around. Five hundred years of brutality, genocide, slavery, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, imperialism, and militarism must take its toll some day. It was a hardness of heart which made European hegemony possible. It was the same hardness of heart which defeated the penetration of the Gospel for the last five hundred years in Europe and Euro-America. A blindness and insensitivity eventually descends on a people who choose time and again to look the other way. They reach the point where they see and see but do not perceive and hear and hear but do not understand. Thus even the Gospel, for all its joy and terror, becomes emasculated and suborned. Of this the preacher will be personally and painfully aware. How many times has the offending phrase been deleted from the sermon? How many times has the "Thus saith the Lord" been diluted and nullified by equivocation? How many gnats have choked how many wind-pipes, and how many camels have been swallowed whole? A hardness of heart has come upon Israel because the people have indeed been called to repentance but for the wrong sins — they believe but a false gospel; they worship

but a god of their own making; they are born again but it is a miscarriage.

Thus the break-up of family life, the mounting divorce-rate, the lack of community consciousness, the neuroses and the suicides, the oppression of a techno-culture, the democracy of a minimum-participation, the pollution of the environment, the impending nuclear holocaust are the price which must be paid for the arrogance of power and a history of dominance and exploitation. God has made of one blood all the nations of men and women to dwell on the face of the earth. He is no respecter of persons. He has no favourite country. In every nation, Christian or not, those who fear him and do righteously are acceptable to him; and the whole of humankind, indeed the whole of his creation, is like the seamless robe. It is woven from the top throughout and to rend even the hem is to mar the whole. What goes around, must come around. A nation cannot use its power in the world for its own profit and aggrandisement without some day having to reap a grim harvest. A nation which once fought for its own freedom and is now dedicated to halting the freedom of other nations will shortly lose its own freedom, not by invasion but by self-destruction. A nation which has grown fat devouring other peoples must soon turn on itself when there is nothing outside of itself left to devour.

International Justice

The job is therefore well cut out for the preacher of international missions. It is to awaken in the hearers a sense of international solidarity based on justice between the nations and within the nations. Like judgment it begins at the house of God; like charity it begins at home. The preacher will take the congregation gathered with the utmost seriousness. Wounds will have to be inflicted so that healing might come. Depression, neuroses, melancholia, and other forms of illness will not be treated in isolation but will be related to pre-occupation with self and with lack of genuine concern for the neighbour, over-anxiety about the future, lack of faith in God and the fear of death. A passion for justice heals all of these illnesses more effectually than tranquillizing pills or couches. Those who must save their lives will lose them and those who will risk their lives for the sake of justice will discover life. Where individuals are aroused from pre-occupation with self to justice in their society and the world, healing comes, because there is no time to be neurotic. Irrationality, prejudice, xenophobia, chauvinism, jingoism, and hedonism are put to flight. They begin to feel like other people and with other people. They begin to see the world from the position of those who suffer injustice. They begin to discover where their priorities lie. Their values are set in order and they are saved from a crooked generation. They will not withdraw from the world, but will be even more involved in the world. At a glance they will detect the specious arguments and the fraudulent policies. Their very simplicity will confound the wisdom of the unwise, the prudence of the prudent, and the piety of the pious. Their one unanswerable appeal will be "*Let justice roll down . . . let justice roll down . . .*"

The Third World

Is this enough for international missions and the Third World? Put it this way: It may not be enough but, without it, the rest is futile. What would we in the Third World do with missionaries who were not seized with the claims of justice, who were more concerned with spreading American influence than with proclaiming the good news of justice and the Kingdom of God which rules over all? What would we do with missionaries who were more intent on fighting bogies than on fighting poverty, and injustice? What kind of relationship could exist between Churches for whom the claims of justice had no place? What would the giving and receiving of benefactions mean?

What would be the purpose or the result of exchanges across the cultural frontiers? What would those coming from the Third World be expected to say or to learn? What would be happening to them besides being programmed to be mis-representatives abroad and misfits and anachronisms at home?

What the Third World needs from the Churches of the West more than anything else is international solidarity based on justice; for, unhappily, whatever might be done in the Third World to accelerate development and to improve conditions, the key still lies in the industrialized countries and the power which they hold in economic relations and in the terms of trade. Would that it were possible to cut all links and to bring the dependency-syndrome to an end once for all! That is neither possible nor permissible. Therefore, there is no other way to preach international missions which excludes international justice. It is a risk that the preacher cannot avoid. It is a risk which is well worth taking. It is a risk which safeguards integrity in preaching. Some will take umbrage, withdraw their support and go to their own place; but it is the kind of definitive position, the vindication of which the preacher can calmly await. There is a sense in which the right is already triumphant in the very doing of it by the peace and the healing which it brings to the doer. And then, joy comes in the morning.