

MISSION AT THE CROSS ROADS

This article by Bishop Michael Doe, former General Secretary of USPG, is based on the sermon he preached at the annual Reunion of Mission Partners and Staff on Holy Cross Day 2016.

In this sign, conquer

The Emperor Constantine ruled the Roman Empire from 306 to 337AD. Tradition has it that his mother, Saint Helena, on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem discovered the actual cross on which Jesus died, and this is commemorated every year on Holy Cross Day. Constantine's own faith is unclear, but in the year 312, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, he reportedly looked up to the sun and saw above it a cross of light, and the words "In this sign, conquer". For the Christian Church this heralded the end of nearly three centuries of suffering. As the Church had grown from those early beginnings in Palestine the more it had been subjected to attack and martyrdom. But now a new dawn was breaking, and it was on the way to becoming the established religion of the Roman Empire. Great news!

"From Constantine onwards the Church became institution-alised, centralised, and, most dangerous of all, greatly tempted to use earthly power to achieve its means."

Or was it? Should the words "Cross" and "Conquer" ever be put together? If we believe that Mission is the activity

of God in our world, from Creation onwards... If we believe that we see this God, and what he's about, most of all on the Cross... What does that say about Mission? How can what we see on the Cross help us to understand the purposes of the Church, including its mission agencies, today? How can the Cross become the central motif for those of us called, as Pope Francis puts it, to be "a community of missionary disciples"?¹

The Cross—Resurrection connection

There is a fundamental truth about the Christian Gospel which we lose at our peril. It's to do with the connection between Cross and Resurrection. The Cross was about a God who, as Paul writes to the Philippians, "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross"². The Resurrection did not undo that. It did not replace sacrifice with victory. It did not mean love giving way again to power. The hands which the risen Christ lifts to bless his followers still bear the imprint of the nails.

A warning bell

So the phrase, "In this sign, conquer", should ring warning bells. In that early period from Pentecost onwards, the Church had grown remarkably fast, but it wasn't an export drive. In each place it took root in the local

¹ "Evangelii Gaudium - Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World" 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

² Philippians 2:4-11

culture, and bore fruit there. But from Constantine onwards the Church became institution-alised, centralised, and, most dangerous of all, greatly tempted to use earthly power to achieve its means.

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In the Middle Ages, when the European rulers of Christendom organised the Crusades to conquer the Holy Land, they carried the emblem of the Cross ahead of them: “In this sign, conquer”. When the modern missionary period started, with the Spanish and Portuguese invasion and occupation of Latin America, there was no clear dividing line between imperialism and evangelism, between Crown and Cross. And when we Brits joined in, often aligning the interests of Empire and Church, we too often exported an understanding of Mission which had more to do with expansion and imposition than service and suffering.

USPG is the inheritance of two agencies from this missionary era. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded in 1701, incorporated by Royal Charter, originally to support the Church of England in the American colonies. The Universities’ Mission to Central Africa was the CofE response to lectures given by David Livingstone on his return from Africa in 1857³. In the 1960’s they united, together with the Cambridge Mission to Delhi, to form USPG⁴.

³ See “Three Centuries of Mission”, Daniel O’Connor, Continuum, 2000

⁴ In 2016 the Society, which had changed its name to Us. for a few years, returned to USPG but with the initials now standing for “United Society Partnership in the Gospel”.

⁵ HH Montgomery, “Foreign Missions”, Longmans Green & Company, 1902

⁶ <http://anglicanhistory.org/england/hhmontgomery1933/09.html>

We who have inherited the mantle of these societies will of course want to say that their kind of missionary activity was very different from that of the Crusades. They did much more good than harm. But even here we see how easy it was to elide the growth of the Church with other imperial ambitions. Take for example one of my predecessors, Bishop Henry Montgomery, the father of Second World War hero, Field Marshall Montgomery of Alamein. He had gone out to be Bishop of Tasmania, and on appointment as Secretary of SPG in 1901 he made the long journey back to London. It took six weeks – I always tried to remember that when sitting in an airport complaining that the plane was an hour late! On board ship he had time to complete his Handbook on Foreign Missions. He wrote: “These are great times and one feels the stir of an Imperial Christianity... Clergy are officers in an imperial army... full of the Imperial spirit, not merely of the empire of England but of something still greater, the empire of Christ”. Anglicanism, he believed, could include many races but only if the Church of England assumed its proper vocation to lead them⁵.

That was 1902, and what a difference a century makes. Although I note in passing one thing that hasn’t changed: his biographer records that, “One of Bishop Montgomery’s first ideals was to raise the income of the Society”⁶. Plus ça change...

So what might all of this say to us about some of the issues we face today?

Number One: we are called to live under the shadow (and also the protection) of the Cross. The first calling of the Church is not to govern and expand but to serve and, if necessary, to suffer. The centre of

Mission (as David Bosch put it) is “the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world”⁷. We can be an Easter People – and “Alleluia” can be our song – but only if we see Resurrection through the lens of the Cross.

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Worldwide that means compassion – not a sentimental concern but a “suffering with” – those parts of the world at the blunt end of its pain and injustice. The people of Pakistan; those suffering from religious persecution and gender discrimination, and those who live in daily fear of the Taliban, not least in the Diocese of Peshawar. The people of the Pacific, and Bangladesh, as rising sea levels threaten. The people of Zimbabwe, where life can be difficult now, but whatever will happen when Mugabe finally goes? And of course here in Europe those joining the flow of Refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, where this Society, together with the Diocese of Europe, is doing so much.

And what about our own Church of England? The death earlier this year of David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham during the Thatcher years and the Miners’ Strike, has reminded us that while our church leaders today may say some politely critical things about poverty and community, we have lost the prophetic voice which dared to identify with the power-less, and confront

injustice and structural evil head-on. We give priority less and less to the kind of places highlighted by the “Faith and the City”⁸ report thirty years ago, and we’re now much keener on the kind of places where there will be church growth.

Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, says that General Synod’s current “Reform and Renewal” programme is not good mission nor good Anglicanism: people will not be won over “by increasingly organisational, theologically narrow and vogueish sectarian expressions of faith”. We need to be “a broad church – capacious and generous”. Anglicans, he says, are not narrow people⁹.

I dare to suggest that Anglicanism (although not exclusively of course) at its best portrays something of what it means to follow Christ Crucified: seeking to serve rather than demand, to be open, to be an inclusive Church. And it is in this Church of England, and in the wider Anglican Communion, that mission agencies must find their place.

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Earlier on I was critical, you may think unfairly, of much missionary activity in the 19th and early 20th century. That all began to change in the 1960s. And the irony is that just as the mission agencies were returning to what might be seen as a more Gospel-focussed understanding of mission and partnership, based not

⁷ David Bosch, “Transforming Mission”, Orbis Books, 1991

⁸ “Faith in the City - A Call for Action by Church and Nation”. The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas Church House Publishing 1985. Now available as a download at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/55076/faithinthecity.pdf>

⁹ Martyn Percy “On Not Rearranging the Deckchairs on the Titanic: A Commentary on Reform and Renewal in the Church of England” <http://modernchurch.org.uk/downloads/finish/818-articles/768-on-not-rearranging-the-deckchairs-on-the-titanic>

least on the Cross, the world around was changing in the other direction.

The world has changed

First, domestically, just as we were realising that mission must now be rooted in self-determination and partnership, recognising what the Anglican Congress in Toronto in 1963 called our “mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ”¹⁰, the climate here was changing and we started moving back from partnership to sponsorship, from global belonging to selective relationships (often chosen by the more powerful party), returning to what might be seen as a more 19th century understanding of charity with not a little touch of the old imperialisms.

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The other aspect of what began to happen in the 1960s is more controversial, but I dare to finish with it. Just as the Western Church was shedding its imperial history, some of the newly independent churches of the Communion began to flex their own muscle, for good, and also for bad. And so we find ourselves today with the power politics within our Anglican Communion, with different parts trying to tell, even compel, other parts to do what they want¹¹.

There are strong feelings on all sides. For many of us in USPG today, the full inclusion of all God’s people – black and white, male and female, gay and straight

– is a natural, inescapable consequence of the love of God which we see poured out on the Cross. At the same time we cannot be blind to the fact that some of these issues can make life difficult for some of our sisters and brothers in parts of the world where they already suffer a great deal. But what we cannot do, and what we cannot let others parts of the Communion do, is to wield power in such a way that we are imitating the power struggles of the world rather than the pattern of the Cross.

We need to focus again on the God who shows us in Christ, and most of all on the Cross, that the greatest power is the power of love. We seek that forgiving, accepting love within ourselves, but it also needs to guide and direct the way we live together, in the Church, and in the World.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Join the discussion
on the Rethinking
Mission forum

¹⁰ The Toronto Anglican Congress, 1963 http://anglicanhistory.org/canada/toronto_mutual1963.html

¹¹ A deeper analysis of these issues can be found in “Saving Power – the Mission of God and the Anglican Communion”, Michael Doe, SPCK 2011