

Sermon at St. George's Church Mbanga

The Bishop has invited me to offer a homily on the occasion of his Episcopal Visitation. I am Grateful to him.

An Episcopal Visitation is an administrative part of a bishop's ministry. But is also pastoral as an opportunity for the bishop to build up a warm relationship with the faithful and a strong collegial working arrangement with his clergy. It is administrative; it is pastoral; but it is also about mission. The word mission comes to us from a Latin translation of the older Greek word 'apostolic'. The ministry of the whole baptized people of God is apostolic, but in particular the ministry of a bishop must be apostolic, linking us with the dynamism, faithfulness, and sacrifice of the first apostles as they shared the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The apostolate or mission is a primary task of Christ's church. At the end of St. Matthew's gospel we are commissioned, that is sent out, to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit - the Holy Trinity.

I have the honour of being Canon Theologian of this Anglican Diocese of Cameroon. My first responsibility in serving our bishop and diocese is to return time after time to theology. God is in control, and if God is in control we cannot be obedient to him unless we pay attention to him, dwell more deeply in his Trinitarian life, and work with him in calling the world back to the garden of delight that he first intended for us.

The study of mission is called Missiology but missiology must be rooted in theology. If it is not then the mission, or apostolicity, of the church will be man made, and not from God. If a congregation prepares a mission strategy it will fail if first God has not been consulted. Many clever schemes for mission last only for a short time, but then die, like the crop that was sown by the Sower in the parable Jesus tell us in Luke ch 8.

All apostolic activity must begin and end with God, and be sustained by him, not by human exercise and activity.

All mission must be God's mission. He is the Missioner; he sends from himself, and he sends us. In the economy of the Holy Trinity God's mission is as Creator. He speaks the word and it comes into being. From the life of the Trinity the apostolic God sends forth his Word. This Word becomes flesh and dwells among us in Jesus. This word is sent as Good News to all people. The angels singing, Do not be afraid, for we bring tidings of great joy, for a child has been born who is Christ the Lord.

Throughout St John's gospel our Lord frequently refers to the fact that the Father has sent him. He has sent him to be Good News. If God is the great missioner, then Jesus is the great evangelist, for the good news we preach and live by is not the bible, but Jesus. The bible is our primary written source about Jesus - the bible contains our Holy scriptures - but the Good News is Jesus.

How does St. Mark begin his gospel? 'The beginning of the Good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Our mission as the church must be God's mission, as we seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ whom he has sent.

So how are we as God's people to discern our mission tasks? How do we know if we are being faithful to his word? How do we confirm that we are being obedient?

First we must attend to God in prayer. It will be better if this prayer is without human words, because human words can make us deaf to God's word. Praise is good, but we can overwhelm the 'still small voice' as God whispers his divine mission to us. Remember Elijah in 1 Kings 19, 9. The great prophet seeks God in the earthquake, in the whirlwind, and in the fire, but God is not to be found in these great powerful phenomena, he is found in the 'still small voice'. So we must attend to the still small voice, and to do this we must make time for silent prayer before beginning any mission activity. If we do not we will be like the idols of the pagans, 'eyes have they, but they do not see, ears have they but they do not hear'.

This silent and prayerful listening to God we call CONTEMPLATION. It is a spiritual exercise that demands great attention. St Benedict begins his Rule of Life with the words, 'Listen my son with the ear of the heart'. This is what is needed for us to understand what the nature of our mission is to be. It is God who shapes our mission; we do not shape God according to our mission strategy.

es, no matter how clever they may be. Listen, look, discern where God is working, and build your mission strategies around this.

Secondly, we have a distinctive Anglican method of doing or theology. It is well tested and has stood the test of time. It is based on four pillars - scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This is a development of what we refer to as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Central to this is that the church is Episcopally ordered, and sacramental. One of the purposes of a Visitation is to allow the bishop to check that the church's life is so ordered that its identity is recognizably and confidently Anglican. He is able to rebuke those who stray from Anglicanism, but also to encourage mission using the well tested Anglican method. The Anglican church has more than justified its faithfulness to God's mission as we have borne witness to our Anglican foundations in almost every nation of the world. Remain open and faithful to the Anglican way, for it is not only apostolic, it is also Catholic as we witness universally throughout the world.

Thirdly, we will know if we are being obedient to God in our apostolic task if our mission bears fruit in the transforming of people's lives. This is of course the fruits of God's Holy Spirit. When we see these fruits then we will know that God the Holy Trinity is indeed blessing and anointing what we are doing, for we will be doing it obedient to God's prevenient Grace - his Grace that plans our programme for us. Unless he goes before us we can do nothing. Unless we are obedient and attentive to where he is leading then we can do nothing, for 'all things come from him, and of his own do we give him'.

So to conclude; all mission is from God. We must discern where his mission is leading us and to do this we need quiet contemplation, spending serious time in his presence. The Good News is Jesus Christ and he is the great Evangelist, because he is not only the messenger of God, he is also the message. Our Anglican tradition has been faithful in its apostolicity and catholicity for 500 years, so the method is there as a gift for us to use - we do not need to invent something new. The anointing of the Holy Spirit will confirm our obedience, and will bless us if we are humble in following the Way of the Cross. The Good News of Jesus Christ is about the Cross, and the mystery of our baptism into sharing the life of a crucified and risen Saviour. Always remember there is no empty tomb, but first a cross, for God first loved us before we loved him, and he sent his only begotten Son to draw the world back to him.