

## “Proclaim the Good News”

*Without doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. But for this to come about what is needed is to first remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself. At this moment the lay faithful, in virtue of their participation in the prophetic mission of Christ, are fully part of this work of the Church. Their responsibility, in particular, is to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society.*<sup>1</sup>

Such is the call to *evangelisation* which simply means “to preach the gospel”.<sup>2</sup> The mission, the command, to evangelise was given to the Church by Jesus himself as we hear in St Matthew’s gospel: *You are the salt of the earth, but if salt becomes tasteless...it is good for nothing. You are the light of the world... No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on a lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before all people.* [5 v13-16] It will have come as no surprise to Our Lord’s disciples, therefore, to be reminded of the task of evangelisation as he was about to leave them to return to his Father: *Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.* [28 v 19-20]

We received this same commission from our baptism, but it can be all too easy for us to read those words of Jesus and say, “Yes, but he was speaking to the apostles.” Well, actually, no he wasn’t – at least not exclusively. The first quotation above follows directly after the Beatitudes and was a part of Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount addressed to “the crowds” [5 v1]. The second is his final address to “the eleven” [28 v 16], who we commonly refer to as the apostles, but then, as we declare in the Creed, the Church is “apostolic” – it is descended from, and shares the mission and teaching authority of, the apostles. Who and what they were, we are. The commission they received from Our Lord we too have received – all of us, not just priests or religious, but the whole church.

In its decree “On the Apostolate of Lay People”, the Second Vatican Council stated:

The Church’s mission is concerned with the salvation of all people; and they win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ...

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<sup>1</sup> *Christifideles Laici* - the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world, para 34

<sup>2</sup> from the Latin *evangelium* meaning “good news” which, in Old English, was *godspell*

Lay people have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing people to faith and to God...

The true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them to faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life...and in the hearts of all should the apostle's words find echo: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." [1Cor 9 v16]<sup>3</sup>

Now all of that is fairly heavy stuff – especially that last bit! We are reminded of the gospel parable of the talents and the fate suffered by the individual who buried his talent and so failed to gain any interest from it for his master. And, yes, intellectually at least, we know *what* we should be doing; the trouble comes in knowing *how* to do it. Do we see ourselves out and about preaching and teaching in public places as Jesus and the disciples did? – especially given that society around us is as unknowing of God and the things of God as the people of Our Lord's time were. I suspect we probably don't, and that's because of one major problem: we're British; we're much more reserved than that; it's not the British way.

You must have seen (on television if not in the flesh) people who stand on their soapboxes at Hyde Park Corner and expound their convictions to all who pass by. Would you have the courage to do that? It would be bad enough giving forth on a general secular topic that stood an outside chance of grabbing people's attention, but would you dare speak out on the subject of Jesus Christ and the gospel call to salvation? I have to be honest and say that I would feel more concerned about the damage to the reputation of the Faith that might be caused by such an un-British way of witnessing, and the possibility, therefore, of people rejecting both the message and the weirdo messenger (as they might perceive it) out-of-hand. If the baby goes out with the bathwater, do we need to use something other than a bath? (As I write that, the bath image of baptism comes to mind and therefore the answer to my question is probably "no".)

Maybe some of you have participated in such acts of public witness and have had a very positive experience of them. A lot probably depends on the context and the methods used. Realistically, however, we probably have to say that it isn't for everyone – maybe it should be, and more power to those who can do it - but realistically it just isn't everyone's cup of tea. That said, then what is? We are bearers of the light of our faith, a light that is meant to shine out to all people and not just light up our own way. How might we let that light shine as we should and as Jesus calls us to?

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<sup>3</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, para 6.

**A** useful starting point might be to ask ourselves how were we evangelised? How did we come to our present state of faith? I am reminded of one of the bidding prayers in the Rite of Marriage, which reads: *We pray for the friends of N. and N. We pray especially for those who have had some part in bringing them to this happy day.* Who has helped bring us to this happy day? – parents, godparents, teachers, priests, nuns, friends, spouses, ...who? And, just as importantly, how? You might want to pause for a while and have a think about that - who are all the people, and what have been the influences, that have helped shape your faith, and you as a person of faith?

**L**et's just remind ourselves once again of Our Lord's words of farewell to his disciples: *Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations.* Each week, each Sunday (at least), we come to Mass to have our spiritual and sacramental batteries recharged, and at the end of Mass we are told: *Go, the Mass is ended...go in peace to love and serve the Lord* - slightly different words but exactly the same commission. We have to come down off the mountain of the Transfiguration (*It is wonderful for us to be here* [Mt 17 v 4]) and out into the real world where the gospel, the good news of salvation, is waiting to be preached – by us. And so, if we are not going to stand in the market place and on the street corner to do it, how then are we going to?

**P**erhaps we need to read one or two of the gospels first, from start to finish. How did Our Lord set about his mission of teaching and preaching? What did he do? What did he say? What made the people stop and listen? What did they see that caught their attention? To whom was his message directed? With whom did he spend his time? How was he present to them? How did he speak to them? What was the essence of the word he preached? How did he get that message across? How did he deal with discouragement and frustration? From where did he draw strength and encouragement?

**T**he early Christian writer, Tertullian, observed that others would look and say: “See how these Christians love one another.” Would people say that when they look at us? It's that old adage about if being a Christian was a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us? We give our most immediate Christian witness by the example of our lives. St James writes: “I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds...faith without deeds is useless.” [2 v18, 20] People should be able to look at us, at who we are, what we do, how we speak, the moral principles we live by, and want to find out more about the faith that motivates us and the person of Jesus Christ in whom and for whom our lives are lived.

**C**ould you try inviting back to church those who have fallen away from the practice of their faith? Are there any past misunderstandings that might need to be cleared up first – either by you or the priest? Do they simply need to know

how easy it is to come back, that there are no recriminations, and that the sacrament of reconciliation is that easy also? Could we be even more ambitious and reach out to non-Catholic friends, neighbours, or even family members who might want to find out more about the faith – our faith? Maybe you could invite them to come to church with you just for a look round. Maybe they'd like to come with you to Mass. Can you answer their questions? Could the priest?

**J**ust as they say about charity beginning at home, the work of evangelisation is also needed within our own faith community. We need to be strong in faith ourselves if we are to effectively evangelise others. Those who can still remember having a hearth and an open fire will also remember that the coals would settle and so, from time to time, you had to give them a good stirring up with a poker to get more heat out of them and before you put any more fuel on. We can all get like that in our spiritual and pastoral lives, everything settles – even comfortably – and it doesn't do any harm at all to have a good stir up from time to time. We all have a part to play in keeping the flame of faith burning strongly in one another – encouraging, supporting, listening, helping and responding to one another's needs. Like it or not we are co-dependent as members of the body of Christ and the spiritual health of the members determines the health of the body.

**I**f we return to that parting commission of Jesus at the end of St Matthew's gospel: *Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations*, his very last words are: *And know that I am with you; yes, to the end of time*. The end of time will be when Jesus returns: the parousia, the Second Coming. It has been expected since the days and weeks immediately following his ascension. Why the delay? Could it perhaps be that there is still a lot of work left to do in establishing his kingdom by bringing as many people as possible to faith in Jesus Christ? That's just my own personal reflection, I have no theological or scriptural proof – it's just a thought. But might it be possible? And might it, therefore, serve to emphasise all the more the urgency of the task still remaining and the commission still awaiting our response?

*The Council, then, makes to all the laity an earnest appeal in the Lord to give a willing, noble and enthusiastic response to the voice of Christ... It is the Lord himself who is once more inviting all the laity to unite themselves to him ever more intimately...and to join in his mission as Saviour. It is the Lord who is again sending them into every town and every place where he himself is to come.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, para 33.