

THE GREAT COMMISSION RELEVANT OR REDUNDANT

William Carey is regarded by many Protestants as 'the father of modern missions'. He wrote a book with the catchy title *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. The title is an indication of the difficulty he faced. Since his fellow Calvinists believed conversion to be God's own work, there was nothing much human beings could do about it. Carey disagreed. His study of the Scriptures and careful examination of church history led him back to Matthew 28.18-20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.

This 'great commission', he argued, is a divine mandate and therefore must be obeyed. In a powerful sermon in Nottingham on 31st May, 1792 he castigated the congregation for their lack of obedience to the divine mandate and is reputed to have uttered the famous words 'Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God'. There was little response and so he himself set off for India. William Carey is regarded as the Father of the modern missionary movement and Matthew 28, 18-20 (the 'great commission') has become the '*magna carta*' of mission.

In 1987, I too went to India and Sri Lanka. At that time I was teaching missiology and applied theology to Anglicans, Methodist, URC and Baptist ministerial students in the Northern Federation for Training in Ministry at Manchester. I went to India to lecture, meet theologians but above all to learn how mission was perceived in a third-world context. The experience affected me deeply and radically changed my theological outlook.

One of my most depressing moments in India was preaching in a decaying Victorian building. We sang unaccompanied from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. The pipe organ stood in the side transept covered in grime, its mechanisms long since eaten away by rodents and humidity. The few members of the congregation, so bright and lively outside the building, sat unresponsive, motionless and far away. The stately liturgy of Cranmer reflected an England of long ago imposed by Empire. I kept asking myself how did we get to this? Is this the legacy of the great commission?

THE FAILURE OF THE DREAM

The 'great commission' is founded on an absolute command and offers a universal dream. 'All authority'... 'all nations' ... 'all I command you' ... 'always'. Many believe that the missionary task is to 'win the world for Christ'. In the last two hundred years the industrial revolution enabled the Western nations to attempt to realize this. The 19th century missionary rode on the back of this economic and technological imperialism. Enthusiastic missionaries fired by the Gospel, went to the ends of the earth 'seeking souls' who they believed were 'lost' in darkness.

Far, far away in heathen darkness dwelling,
Millions of souls for ever may be lost;
Who, who will go, salvation's story telling,
Looking to Jesus, minding not the cost?

The music of this vision was reflected in the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. At this world gathering, inspired by the euphoria of the expansive West the missionaries present set their target; the evangelization of the world in one generation. There have been similar calls ever since, for the dream lives on. But this left-over of nineteenth century optimism was to be shattered. In 1914 an incident in a tiny Balkan state sent shock waves rippling first across Europe and subsequently across the world. One by one nations were sucked into a terrifying encounter. Within a couple of years all the peoples of the earth had become caught up in a holocaust of destruction. Here indeed was a nightmare response to the missionary dream. The Christian West instead of being the propagator of light became a creator of hell on earth. This was the beginning of the end for Christian Europe. The drift of people from the churches became a veritable stampede. William Fullerton's hymn is bereft of former confidence.

I cannot tell how he will win the nations,
How he will claim his earthly heritage,
How satisfy the needs and aspirations
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage.

Europe's time had passed. After the great depression and the Hitler madness two new super-giants, the United States of America and the Soviet Union, stalked the earth bearing hideous weapons. Their antagonism became a sort of frozen paranoia. Yet the paralysis of the mighty gave the small peoples, their chance. They, who had passively been drawn into the wars of the rich, not unnaturally wanted to eat from the rich man's table. In a world which had contracted to a global village, the underdeveloped nations who had fought for the Western allies now wanted their own autonomy.

Before these momentous events the decimated Western churches retreated. As we entered the sixties period when materially we 'never had it so good', many social and religious prophets were predicting the end of religion itself. There was little of the old gospel left to proclaim. The watershed came in the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The year was 1968. At its meeting in Uppsala, it was publicly acknowledged that the old dream had died.

The mood in 1980 at the Ninth World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Melbourne was apocalyptic.

We meet under the clouds of nuclear threat and annihilation. Our world is deeply wounded by the oppressions inflicted by the powerful upon the powerless. These oppressions are found in our economic, political, racial, sexual and religious life. Our world, so proud of human achievements, is full of people suffering from hunger, poverty and injustice.

The world-wide televised images of smoke over Manhattan on the 11th September 2001, and the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre is an apocalyptic sign. The Freudian imagery of towers destroyed by jet aircraft, the symbol of freedom, portrays a world in which both the hubris of global capitalism and the danger of exclusive ideologies are exposed.

Does the 'great commission' have any relevance in such a world? Has the missionary dream been totally compromised? Is a re-interpretation of the dream possible?

A TEXTUAL RE-INTERPRETATION

First the Journey

The Greek word *poreuthentes*, means 'to depart, to leave, to cross boundaries' (Matt. 28.7 and 19). The word reminds us of the peripatetic Jesus who repeatedly crossed boundaries to reach out to all on the periphery. Chapter 28 of Matthew's Gospel describes the Easter experience. The women return to the place where they had laid Jesus. However, within that tomb (womb) they are told 'He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come; see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee' (Matt. 28.6-7). They are sent on an outward-bound mission to find the risen Christ who always goes before them. But is it simply Christ that they discover?

The New Testament scholar, John Ziesler, commenting on this passage, suggests that Christ is present in the same way as the glory (*shekinah*) is present with those who meet around the *Torah*. Jesus, for Matthew, has now become the 'mode of divine presence'. Matthew is therefore suggesting that we come to dwell in the presence of Yahweh through our keeping of the *Torah* of Jesus. The later addition of the Trinitarian formula to this text is appropriate because the God we experience is not a tribal Christian god, but a God who is essentially mysterious. He/she is totally beyond us and yet ever present.

Disciples travel under universal promise of 'I AM with you. But what do we do on this journey of discovery? The 'great commission' commands us to 'make disciples' through the twin actions of teaching and baptizing.

Second the Teaching.

We are to help people 'observe all that I have commanded you' (Mtt. 28, 20). Matthew's second ingredient of learning differs from ours in that he uses the word, 'observe', 'keep' or 'practice' (*terein*) to refer to a catechetical process aimed not so much at imparting 'knowledge of the word' but of enabling people to 'do the word'. As Jesus points out:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock (Mtt.7.24).

For most of us in church, 'teaching' (*didaskontes*) is an intellectual enterprise which attempts to impart knowledge, experience and insight. Teaching in the 'great commission' is, however, not primarily about digesting ideas but about securing justice.

In Matthew's language justice is 'righteousness' - a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and

pharisees (Mtt. 5. 20). Christian disciples obey and teach the *Torah* as they journey. This 'righteousness', moreover, is not simply justice for people but includes the ecological dimension of justice for the earth, for the Hebrews believed that the entire cosmos stood on two pillars; a pillar of justice and a pillar of righteousness (Ps. 97. 2). If these were not maintained then the primal chaotic waters would pour in and destroy all life (Gen.7.11) God is inviting all people to be co-workers with him in the struggle to restore righteousness to the planet and all its creatures.

Third the Baptism

If we have to re-think our notion of teaching, so too with our understanding of 'baptizing' (*baptizontes*) in the name of the Trinity. Baptism signals liberation into a new humanity where the divisions of race, sex and social class are transcended. Kenneth Leech says that the record of the British churches on matters of race, sex and class, is a denial of the fundamental understanding of baptism. Baptism is not a return trip through still waters into the safety of the womb, rather it is to be called to undertake an outward-bound journey into the wildernesses of the world (Mk.1.12). Father Aloysius Pieris, a theologian from Sri Lanka, says that our Lord's action in fulfilling all righteousness through baptism was not simply a negative protest, neither was it a demonstration of passive solidarity with the poor; it was a calculated strategy against mammon.

Baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is therefore God's way of calling us to establish solidarity with the poor, the marginalized and the excluded so that we can experience the great 'I AM.

ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS

The 'Alls' of the 'great commission' sets the task within a universal and inclusive framework. I suspect that the suggested re-interpretation above will not find ready acceptance since our theological mindset conditions us, as Western Christians, to single out exclusive texts like John 14.6, 'no one comes to the Father but by me', and Acts 4.12, 'there is no other name', while at the same time makes us deaf to a more inclusive scriptural passage, like Amos 9.7:

Did I not bring Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?

It makes us forget those many parts of the Bible where God speaks his word of revelation through outsiders like Job, Ruth, and the Canaanite woman (Mtt. 15.21-28) who changed the mind of Jesus. We have an exclusive mindset which has been formed by nearly fifteen hundred years of seeing mission as crusade.

For a thousand years, soldiers of Christ put their armour on, often over their priestly robes, and rode out to do battle. Evangelism was seen as a holy war; a fight to the death against the enemies of Christ. Infidels without and heretics within had to be vanquished; thus a massacre of Jews in Germany launched every crusade. Caged in for nearly five hundred years by Islam on the eastern and southern boundaries, it is hardly surprising that many Christians are antagonistic to other faiths. With the opening up of the New World, fresh opportunities for crusade were offered. Having failed to win the battle against Islam in Europe, the church went out to conquer 'other worlds' for Christ. Latin America still bears the scars of this confrontational campaign. The native North American Indians say 'when the Europeans came, we had land and they had the Bible, but now we have the Bible and they have the land.' Sadly, the powerful in the US are still trapped in this crusade mentality.

Understandings of the gospel will always suffer from some cultural distortion. The Latin-American theologian Jose Bonino, in words which burn with passion, puts the challenge:

I sense that there is a tendency to think that evangelism can remain unaffected, can carry on business as usual, without forgetting social action, but without being fundamentally changed. This, it seems to me, is to be a deadly misunderstanding. The real problem is that the alliance of missions and Western capitalistic expansion has distorted the Gospel beyond recognition, and that evangelism, prayer, worship and personal devotions have been held captive to an individualistic, otherworldly, success-crazy, legalistic destruction of the Gospel. Evangelism, prayer, worship and private devotions do not have to be abandoned. They have to be converted to Christ.

Peter, in his encounter with Cornelius, is forced to enter the topsy-turvy world of God's extra-mural activities and acknowledges that a conversion has taken place in himself:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right (Act.10.34)

Unfortunately such open-heartedness is in short supply. In today's world, tribalism and triumphalism is on the increase. Terrorism and the war against it, are both symptoms of this. These destructive outpourings can be seen as a negative by-product of the Western civilizing enterprise. We are reaping the consequences of our insularity and lack of enthusiasm in pursuing social and economic justice for all the nations of the earth.

The abandonment of a crusading attitude will demand nothing less than a dying and a rebirth of our understanding of ourselves. The conversion required of us has to be more lasting than Peter's. If we do not eat what at first sight seems theologically distasteful (Act.10.4), we may, like Jonah, be consumed by our own bigotry.

And Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.
And God is still waiting for a host of Jonah's
in their comfortable houses
to come around
to his way of loving.

PENTECOST OUTSIDE THE GATE

Orlando Costas says that in the Old Testament, the Jewish temple was the focus of worship. However, with Christ's death, the holy of holies was opened up (Mtt. 27.50-51) so that God is revealed and worshipped 'outside the gate'. The focus of revelation has moved from the middle to the edge.

In the present dispensation God's enigmatic presence can surface at any time or place, and within any people but mostly those 'on the outside'; the marginalized and vulnerable because Jesus died outside the gate (Heb.13.12). They are chosen not because of anything they have done but because of grace (Eph. 2.4-5). Grace is shown to be grace because it now flows mainly from the margins to the centre, from the poor to the rich, from the weak to the strong, from the vulnerable to the complacent (1 Cor.1. 27-30). The church has to have its centre at the edge.

The future of Christianity now lies with the Third World rather than with Europe and North America. The Holy Spirit is calling us in the First World to make a radical reappraisal of our understanding and practice of mission. The Western church has to come to terms with the 'new paradigm' which, according to Father Tisa Balasuriya from Sri Lanka, will be the most important theological innovation since the Protestant Reformation. This paradigm shift invites us to feast at the same table with those who have a faith which is different from our own. God's fellow guests can no longer be ignored or dismissed, for true universality today lies in 'accepting one's own finiteness, one's own particularity and, in so doing, not making that particularity the only true faith, but allowing other particularities to stand side by side with yours as having equal integrity.'

The Holy Spirit is disturbing us in order to renew us. She grieves over our blindness, is present to our wounds, touches the scars of the earth and transcends the black holes of the cosmos. She is the preserver of life in every storm, the promise of light in the darkest hour. Hyun Kyung's sermon in the Canberra Assembly of World Churches, 1991, challenges all bigotry and unconnectedness:

Dear sisters and brothers, with the energy of the Spirit let us tear apart all walls of division and the culture of death which separates us. Let us participate in the Holy Spirit's economy of life, fighting for our life on this earth, in solidarity with all living beings ... Wild wind of the Holy Spirit blow to us. Let us welcome her, letting ourselves go in her wild rhythm of life. Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole of creation.

The baptism of the Spirit empowers us to maintain solidarity with those who live 'outside the gate'. Growing churches have their centres outside of themselves. God the author and pioneer of mission, goes before his people. We never have to go where he has not been. Our problem is 'keeping up' with this elusive God. Yet we follow as people empowered (Acts 1.8). Those of us who embark on this journey discover the 'Living Word' within us; the passion of the Holy Spirit fills us, and an experience of grace sustains us.

In May 1966 Vincent J. Donovan, a Roman Catholic priest based at the Loliondo Mission in East Africa, wrote to his bishop deploring the total failure of their efforts to evangelize the Masai. He requested permission to leave his existing job of running the mission station and simply go, just as he was, to talk with the Masai

about Jesus Christ. His book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, describes the subsequent journey and recounts excerpts of his conversations with these wild, so-called unreachable people. There is an illuminating moment in one of these encounters. He is asked by a Masai villager, 'Has your tribe found the High God? Have you known him?' Donovan was about to give an affirmative reply when something made him pause and reflect on the 'Almighty God' of the Western Church; the God Hitler addressed in his speeches, the God invoked by an American cardinal to bless the 'soldiers of Christ' in Vietnam:

I finally spoke out again, and I marvelled at how small my voice sounded. I said something I had no intention of saying when I had come to speak to the Masai that morning: 'No, we have not found the High God. My tribe has not known him. For us, too, he is the unknown God. But we are searching for him. I have come a long, long distance to invite you to search for him with us. Let us search for him together. Maybe, together, we will find him.'

WHAT MISSION IS NOT

First the missionary adventure should not be seen as an heroic rescue operation in which valiant Christians go into the 'far country' to save the heathen who are tumbling into hell. My theology of mission is encapsulated in our Lord's parable of the prodigal son (Lk.15.11-32). This mysterious Father has so bound himself to fallen humanity, that inclusive relationships take precedent over contractual rules. Neither of the two sons understand this. Is there a suggestion in this parable of no ultimate exclusion? The answer to this question is left hanging in the air and unresolved because the story ends with the elder brother 'outside', but he is 'outside' with the Father who now joins him there.

Secondly, our missionary task is not about 'saving souls'. A human 'soul' cannot be separated out from the complexity of the human personality which is formed as much by physical, genetic, sociological and environmental factors as by decisions of each individual human will. We can only properly understand ourselves as individual persons because of our relationships with others and through our symbiotic relationship with the created order. Further the word 'salvation' is very slippery. In different contexts it can mean different things. A Buddhist might interpret salvation as an experience of illumination, a Hindu as union with God, an alcoholic as deliverance from drink, a starving man will regard it as an offer of bread. We must therefore beware of imposing some Western concept of 'salvation' on peoples of another culture whose world-view is different from ours.

Thirdly, the nations of the world can no longer be regarded as passive groups of pagans waiting to be converted. Such an assumption not only shows a marked lack of respect for people but masks an inherent racism. Conversion is one of the aims of mission but it is not a one-way process as is illustrated by the New Testament example of Peter. Cornelius (Acts 10) is converted and joins the church. Peter is converted to a new understanding of an inclusive and gracious God.

Fourthly, God is already savingly at work in the histories of all people. The Word of God, albeit in a fragmented and distorted form, is already present amongst the people. Jesus, according to John, is the 'universal logos' who enlightens every person coming into the world (Jn.1.9). The statement 'I am the way, the truth and the life' cannot be regarded as a dogmatic claim for Christian exclusivism, it is rather an evangelical way of saying that Jesus is *the* normative expression of God.

For many Western Christians these negations will be greeted with dismay, for they seem to drain our missionary task of all evangelical content. 'If all are already being saved', the argument runs, 'then what's the point of taking the message of salvation to the nations?' The point is this; people of other faiths and of no faith are not yet experiencing FULL salvation but neither are we as Western Christians.

We are not experiencing 'full salvation' because our understanding of conversion has been severely distorted by our imperialistic history. Secondly, we in the rich Western Church are not experiencing 'full salvation' because we are trapped in a culture of mammon. Only as we embrace new companions and maintain solidarity with the poor will we be liberated from our captivity. Thirdly, we along with Christians throughout the world are not experiencing 'full salvation' because this is something which belongs to the future. God may indeed liberate, renew and give us a foretaste of his kingdom, but the day of redemption, when righteousness is fully established on the earth, has not yet dawned. The earth and its ecosystem is still subject to decay; humankind continues to sin and ravage the earth. We have to acknowledge that Christianity, no different from the other faiths, has failed to restore righteousness and give adequate incentive for the preservation of the planet. Until the cosmos itself is free, salvation is incomplete.

THE MISSIONARY TASK

The old missionary dream of 'winning the world for Christ' is not realizable in the present dispensation of the

Holy Spirit. As God's mission partners, we are called to work with him in the threefold task of preserving, liberating and renewing the earth and all its inhabitants. The mission of the church is to plant itself in every place but its actual presence, because of the unpredictability of the Spirit, will be partial, fluid and diverse. The church will take the form of scattered satellite communities of faith, covering the whole face of the earth, acting as 'salt of the earth' (Mtt. 5.13) and as 'lights in the world' (Mtt. 5.14).

The actual size of these communities of faith is not without significance. Because we are to be cities set on a hill and lights of the world (Mtt. 5.14) community size has to relate primarily to the context and the vocational task required. Sometimes only a very small, non-threatening group is needed to witness to the way of righteousness. Anything pretentious would be contextually disastrous. In another situation, a larger group may be required if some political aspect of justice or renewal is to be pursued. Yet there are dangers here since powerful churches can themselves unwittingly become instruments of oppression. When churches of middle-class people become numerically successful, they too often lose their capacity to hear and respond to the cries of those at the margins. If Christian communities are to retain their essential 'saltiness' they will probably always need to be comparatively small, modelling themselves on the vulnerable Jesus.

Church Growth theory believes there to be three necessary forms of church corresponding to size: the cell (3-12 people), the congregation (25-175 people) and the celebration (175+ people). Traditional Protestant Churches have focused on the middle form, 'the congregation', even when size has been below or above the numbers suggested. I suspect that this congregational form will, in the next few decades, wither. Instead there will be regular meetings of the cell and occasional much larger gatherings for consultation and celebration.

Matthew has a section in his Gospel devoted to 'church planting' (Mtt.13.53-19.1). Peter is to build the church (16.18) but is not sufficiently prepared until he has walked on water (14. 28-33). His struggle in the water is Matthew's commentary on the 'great commission'. Before Peter can plant churches he has to get out of the boat (the church) and wade through the stormy chaos. Christ is out there; somewhere; calling. To leave the safety of the familiar ecclesial setting and plunge into the dark abyss is to risk faith and life. The authenticity of God's personal salvation however is proved only when Peter obeys. As he sinks the power of Christ is realized; salvation is experienced, the storm forgotten and the worship of the 'great I AM' begins.

The 'great commission' invites you and me to risk all and step out into the unknown. We have a choice, either we change or we die!