

When Simon Helme emailed me to ask if I could take today's service I was at my desk in the middle of writing a TLS essay (TLS = the URC contextual theology course, Training for Learning and Serving). Last term in TLS we were looking at the growth of the early church. My essay was exploring the role of the church, and one of its key strands was church mission. When (some time after saying yes to Simon) I got to see that the theme of today's service was to focus on the early church "Travelling in Faith - Stepping out" (which is another way of saying, "Mission" I guess) it just confirmed something I've been feeling a lot lately about God and his sense of humour. When He (God - not Simon!) throws something at you He usually does it in such a way that you can't avoid catching it, no matter how much you might not want to!

As many of you know, probably the biggest journey of faith I ever made was when, at the age of 23, I took on a two to three year contract to teach English in a state school in Botswana, Southern Africa. As I flew out from Heathrow I knew I couldn't afford to return for at least two years, and communication in those days wasn't what it is now. As many of you who've done similar things will know, it was a big step. People at the time (and since) talked about me going off to be a Missionary and it still makes me really cross. I was an English teacher, not a missionary, and I had a lot of reservations about that word Mission. It's a funny word and it's done some damage through the ages. Bishop Desmond Tutu apparently once recounted a story about when the missionaries arrived in South Africa. He explained that the missionaries had the Bible, and the natives had the land. The missionaries said 'Let us pray,' and the natives dutifully shut their eyes. When they opened them again, the missionaries had the land and the natives had the Bible....

Now that's a hard story to swallow and I'm certainly not about to suggest that all missionary activity has been as negative and culturally insensitive as some of the worst things that happened in South Africa. There are some inspiring stories about missionary work throughout history including famous people like Gladys Aylward, as well as the quiet unsung heroes and heroines - some of whom are sitting here in our church.... and yet Desmond Tutu's story does help us to focus on a key issue about engaging in mission. When we are sent out to do God's work, we need to be sure that we're serving His ends and not our own.

All through January we've been looking at stories about the early church and its mission. We've thought about how the word Mission means "to send" and heard stories about some of the people who were sent out to establish the Church. One bible dictionary definition suggests that the biblical concept of "mission" is bound up in several different threads - the **authority** of the one who sends; the **obedience** of the one sent; a **task** to be accomplished; the **power** to accomplish the task; and a **purpose** within the moral framework of God's covenantal working. Let's think about how our stories so far fit in to that definition:

- First of all we heard about Stephen who was one of seven men commissioned and sent out by the twelve to increase the work that they could do, and how he was stoned to death while Saul - a persecutor of Christ's followers - looked on.
- In the 'marmite week', we looked at how Ananias had a divine vision and was sent (with some understandable reluctance) to heal Saul the Christ-hater after he was blinded by

a vision of Christ on the Damascus road, and how Saul became Paul the Christ-lover with a commission to spread the truth about Christ.

- Last week we heard about how Barnabus was sent out by the church leaders in Jerusalem and how he and Paul went to Antioch and set the Spirit working among Gentiles.

If we consider all these stories there's a clear sense of divine authority, and the obedience of these early Christians as they were sent out and empowered to accomplish the tasks before them.

Today's passage sees Paul and Barnabus being sent back to Antioch some time later by the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem. Before we can think about it properly, we need to know a bit about what's gone on in between. Paul and Barnabas were obviously quite a double-act and travelled to many places spreading the good news about Christ. They clearly ticked all the boxes in our mission definition and there are references to people being filled with joy and rejoicing as they engage with God's purpose - rather as we rejoiced with Psalm 100 earlier in the service. It wasn't all good news and singing praises though. Inevitably, there were conflicts too.

Simon spoke last week about how conflict can be a good thing - it can help us to refine our opinions and make us stand up for what we believe in. Paul and Barnabus got into a fairly major conflict and so they went back to Jerusalem to work it through with the apostles and the elders there. They had to be sure that the direction they took was divinely inspired.

As we heard last week, the very earliest Christians were mostly Jews and, as the word spread and Gentiles took up the faith, there were arguments about how much of the existing Jewish tradition was necessary for people who were followers of Christ. The Council at Jerusalem at the beginning of Acts 15 was about whether it was necessary for the Gentiles to be circumcised and keep all the laws of Moses in order for them to be Christians. Some of the believers who had been Pharisees were insisting that it was necessary - I suppose they were trying to preserve what they perceived to be the sanctity of their Jewish identity. Others, including Peter, Paul and Barnabas, argued that God had clearly sent the Holy Spirit to people who weren't circumcised, and weren't good law abiding Jews, and that many signs and wonders had been performed by God amongst them. Surely what was good enough for God should be good enough for the church? This argument won the day, but notice that it was only after a full council of the church authorities and much prayer and discernment that the decision was made. Paul and Barnabas didn't make the decision alone, but eventually, with a group of sympathetic supporters to add weight to the argument, they were sent back to Antioch with a letter from the Jerusalem elders. As we heard, the letter contained a disclaimer saying that the arguments about circumcision were not instructions of theirs, and saying that they didn't wish to impose this "burden" on the Christians in Antioch.... And there was much rejoicing - as I'm sure there would be here if a proposal to impose circumcision as a requirement for Dursley Tabernacle church membership was suddenly overturned!

Arguments about circumcision fortunately don't tend to apply much in our modern British context, but the principle is an important one. When we step out on our journey of faith we need to question how much of our activity (missionary or otherwise) is an effort to impose our traditions and our ways of doing things on others, or to give us an outcome that serves our own ends. When I went to Botswana, lots of people at the time thought I was being oh so altruistic going off to teach in Africa, but actually I wanted to travel and I wanted to experience new things. It was the pink flamingos in the advert in the Times Ed that attracted me, not a desire to do God's work, and yet, while I was there I did do some good stuff, and I learned a useful thing or two about cultural sensitivity.

Apologies to those of you who have heard the story before, but the example I want to share was when one of the boys, Kagiso, in my school was caught dealing dagga (marijuana) in school and his punishment was a public flogging. Corporal punishment was the norm in Botswana. As a member of staff, I was expected to attend that flogging, stand on the platform and watch while Kagiso was flogged until his shirt was torn and the blood was flowing down his back. Had I absented myself, I would have appeared, quite publically, to condone his drug-dealing. It was a tough decision for a 24 year old. In the end, I stood on the platform in solidarity with the staff and the system, but I wept openly in a silent protest at the brutality of the treatment.

I tell the story merely to illustrate that when we start moving into spaces where our culture and expectations are different from those around us, we have to face difficult decisions about how to proceed, and we can't always impose our own values on the people around us. This doesn't only apply to circumstances on the opposite side of the world. Last week in our church meeting, we were talking about membership criteria and about costly grace. For those of you who weren't able to be there, it was in the context of the church membership role and we were discussing the levels of commitment which were appropriate for someone to be a full member of this church; we didn't talk about circumcision, but the discussion touched on attendance at church services, involvement in church activities and financial contributions. In that discussion, and in the one about requirements for a child to be accepted for baptism in our church, there was an expectation that church members should attend our worship, and yet for many of the people in our town, coming in here on a Sunday morning sitting down and standing up and being quiet in the right places, singing hymns and being preached at for twenty minutes would feel almost as alien as being expected to be circumcised, or to attend a public flogging.

Now, I fully support the membership policy we voted on last week and I'm not trying to suggest that it needs changing, but there are issues here we need to consider. Last week, all of our discussions were centred on what was best for our members and for the children we were offering to baptise - we identified that membership of Christ's church requires commitment and action, but we do need to think about what we're asking people to commit to and the way we're asking them to act, and whether that's culturally appropriate for them.

Part of the study material for my TLS course cites some research into congregational values and claims that many modern church congregations value:

- **Property over people** (protecting it from damage and investing a significant portion of funds in maintaining and developing it).
- **The status quo** - resisting change because they are comfortable with what they have.
- **Their own needs over those of people outside the church** regarding worship, activities and relationships.
- **Inherited tradition, customs and denominational identity** over relevance within the local culture - doing things "our way".

You could argue that this was the problem that faced those early Jewish Christians in the argument about circumcision. They wanted to hold on to their traditions, but when we compare these values with the gospel values lived out in Christ's ministry, we don't need to think too deeply to see that churches with these values are not working out God's purpose, but their own.

Now I think Dursley Tab does pretty well on this one. We are open to new ideas, we do welcome newcomers, and even children (as long as they don't make too much noise at the wrong moments). We've neglected some of our property quite a lot in favour of people, and - as Simon said last week - there are definitely "whiffs of grace" in our work with people like those of the "Open Door" community and many of our other outreach projects, but I think we still fail to realise sometimes what a huge gulf there is between our cosy church community with its routines and traditions and the reality of people in our town who have no concept of church and no desire to conform to its routines and traditions. How do we reach out to those people who suddenly find themselves in a baptism service and simply can't cope with sitting that long without a cigarette or a drink or a chat? How do we offer experiences of church membership to those who also want to be in the Sunday football teams?

We are prepared to take steps of faith and we're doing some great stuff at the moment developing a community resource, but let's be realistic and honest about this. The Parsonage was not fit for purpose, the lift broke down and some of our wiring was condemned. The changes we are making are as much because we've been pushed out of our comfort zone as anything else. We have a bit of a building crisis! Now the Chinese character for **crisis** is a combination of two other characters: **danger** + **opportunity**, and that's helpful when we consider where we stand right now in the Mission field.

Like Paul and Barnabas, we at the Tab are being given an opportunity to step out of our comfort zone and develop our buildings and our work in this place in ways that reach beyond the safe Dursley Tab URC community which we enjoy belonging to but, as we proceed, we need to think carefully about the values and principles which underpin our decisions.

In my TLS essay I was exploring two books, one written by a German theologian called Jurgen Moltmann and the other by a Scottish theologian called John Drane. Drane's book is clearly intended to address the decline in the church and is preoccupied with church growth. He argues that "in one sense mission is the Church's equivalent of marketing" and identifies the various groups of people in modern British society who are culturally disconnected from the church and whose needs we must address if we are to bring them to Christ. Moltmann's claim that "the real point is not to spread the church but to spread the kingdom" is subtly

different. He is dismissive of paying too much attention to "outward circumstances" such as the fashions and trends of the day; his model, throughout his book, is the figure of Christ. He argues that "healing the sick, liberating the captives, and the hunger for righteousness belong to mission and go together with the preaching of the gospel to the poor". He also writes of a need for "common resistance to idolatry and inhumanity, in common suffering over oppression and persecution." It's an interesting question - are we here to grow Dursley Tabernacle URC - or the kingdom?

Moltmann reminds us that Christ's witness was a costly one and the stories about the early church we've been studying this month have been no different. Stephen, Paul and Barnabas weren't out to do a PR job on the church - theirs was no pretty marketing strategy. Neither were they out to build a cosy club, so that all their church members could do the things they wanted to do, the way they'd always done them. The death of Stephen, the persecution of Paul and Barnabus and the arguments and tensions that arose as they took their message out into the world all confirm that mission is neither an easy nor an especially attractive calling.

Stepping out into the mission field, wherever that may be, takes a huge amount of faith as well as a lot of tolerance and self-awareness and a constant effort to discern God's purpose. Here at the Tab we need to constantly ask ourselves, are we stepping out for the right reasons, with 'a purpose that's within the moral framework of God's covenantal working' or are we, like the churches in the TLS research, merely out to serve our own interests? And we need to think about what we're inviting people to step in to. As we broaden our horizons, how much should we modify our traditions and expectations to fit in with the values and traditions of the non-church culture around us, and are we prepared to risk the conflict and the cultural challenges which will come our way as we seek to grow the kingdom?

All those years ago, I was unhappy about people using the word 'missionary' to apply to me, but I think I've changed my opinion and realised it's something I ought to aspire to. When I was browsing for pictures for today's slides I found the following slogan: "Every Christian is either a Missionary or an Imposter". Maybe we're all missionaries after all.... or at least we ought to be! Let's think about that as we sing our next hymn in which Fred Pratt Green concludes, "We have no mission but to serve, in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating Word."