

Sermon for St Mary's Wimbledon – 27 January 2019

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable to you, O LORD.

When I was twenty, in those halcyon days for undergraduates before internships, with three friends I was able to spend a month in the summer visiting Christian communities in north India and Nepal. First we visited the Delhi Brotherhood, which until six years before had been known as the Cambridge Mission to Delhi. At first it seemed a relic from the past, when a kindly older brother explained that, after he had been ordained, he had come out from Cambridge for two years, only to be still in Delhi fifty two years later. When we sat down for tea at four o'clock, surrounded by a splendid theological library, we were asked in which Colleges we were studying! And yet, as we listened more, we could not fail to be impressed by the wonderful service which the brothers had given, acting as amongst the first bishops in the new ecumenical Church of North India, and spending most of their time serving the poor of the slums of Delhi, in a great range of social and Christian outreach projects.

Two weeks later we stayed at Bishops College in Calcutta, and we visited the range of projects established by Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity in that city. These included homes for disabled and orphaned children, soup runs for those living in shacks at the side of city roads, and the pioneering Kalighat home for the dying, which was one of the earliest forms of hospice. One day our host at Bishops College explained that, if Mother Teresa was at home in her convent, she was likely to welcome us as visitors. I remember very well the twenty minutes we talked to her, and particularly her message that we did not need to come to Calcutta to serve God, because there was much human need for us to minister to, and to share love with, wherever we found ourselves.

In our first lesson this morning we heard of the prophet Ezra, explaining the law of Moses, which God had given to the people of Israel, and of the people being attentive to it. Perhaps they felt as I did listening to the modern day prophet, Mother Teresa. Can you remember when you have heard someone speaking prophetically? This month at St Mary's we are considering what should be the mission of our own church. What each of us can offer, to serve God as fully as possible. In our second reading, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we learn that there are many parts of the body of Christ, that we are given many different gifts, but that we are all part of the one Body, and that none are of a lesser part than others. So what each of us is asked to consider this morning is, what is the part given to me? How can I best serve as part of the overall mission of St Mary's, and of the church?

Just over a year ago I offered to become chair of the Trustees of USPG, the Anglican mission agency which works to unite Anglican churches around the world, by partnering each other to serve God in mission. It does a great job in working to support Anglican churches in education and health projects in some of the poorest parts of the poorest countries. It has a remarkable heritage, formed in 1701 as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, by Thomas Bray, who also formed the Christian publishing house SPCK. In its first century it focused on mission in America, and after

American independence it spread rapidly, principally to British colonies but also more widely. The Universities' Mission to Central Africa, founded by David Livingstone, joined SPG in 1965 to form the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, now known as the United Society Partners in the Gospel. What is important today is that USPG has a strategy relevant to the 21st Century. No more can we be about sending white colonialists to former colonies, or about London dictating what happens elsewhere. Now USPG is all about the Anglican churches around the world treating each other as partners, all equally valued parts of the body of Christ. We still fund projects in the poorest parts of the world, but now these projects are proposed and led by the partner churches. We still train clergy, particularly the church leaders of the future, around the world, but instead of bringing them to Cambridge or to Selly Oak Birmingham, we help fund the training of clergy in their own regions of the world. One of the most exciting initiatives is the new Asian Theological Academy, a virtual college, whose annual gathering for refresher training in Sri Lanka Alison and I plan to attend this summer.

A few years ago I returned to the Delhi Brotherhood, this time accompanied by our then teenage children Alastair and Laura. What was wonderful to see, amidst the great library and the same buildings, was that the brothers were now all Indian. The spirit of the place in providing leadership for the Church of North India is just as strong, indeed more relevant in the modern context. The brothers are now responsible for 19 projects in the slums of Delhi, acting out their Christian mission through pioneering work, like upholding the rights of women who have been oppressed by the men in their society. The Brotherhood is still supported by USPG. At our last meeting of Trustees, one of our number, Bishop Jonathan Ford, described his moving visit to the Brotherhood and its work, as part of his transition from being Bishop of Southampton to becoming the next Dean of York.

You can hear about USPG's current strategy, unveiled at our annual conference last summer, on its website. It involves standing alongside Anglican churches where to be a Christian requires so much more sacrifice than it does in Britain. I recently met a priest from the Philippines, whose Bishop has been imprisoned because he and his Church had been standing up for the rights of indigenous people, whose way of life had been devastated by international mining activities, which the Philippine Government and its Army wanted to foster. It was very humbling to hear him speak. Overnight we have heard the sad news of an attack on a Catholic church in the Philippines. USPG's work also involves supporting those in the poorest countries who are most directly affected by climate change, and those whose way of life is so much more limited by their gender.

There are still opportunities for individuals to offer short periods of service from Britain to partner churches overseas, through the Journey with Us programme. It is recognised that the impact may be as transformative for the individual going on the journey as anything else. Recently I met Kate, an experienced young nurse from Norwich, who had just returned from a nine month placement with the church in Nicaragua. She had been sharing her experience of offering palliative care with hospitals in that country, where the concepts of palliative care are much less well known and practised. She was full of enthusiasm for her experience, and what she had been able to share. USPG is always on the lookout for individuals who might be willing to participate, from recently graduated young people to those with much more experience, including those in the transition to retirement.

I am delighted that USPG is one of the organisations regularly supported by St Mary's under its charitable giving policy. Our funding supports USPG's work overall, with one part specifically given to help fund a particular USPG project led by the Anglican Church of Malawi. This supports girls of school-going age from households with low incomes, helping to improve the sustainability of those families and their neighbourhoods, through the girls continuing in training and schooling. Malawi is also where Margaret Swain volunteered and lived for a year after she served as our churchwarden. There are ten of these projects around the world which USPG suggest that churches and individuals might wish to support, and there are copies of the Partners in Mission booklet at the back of church if you would like to take one after the service. As a family we are supporting a project led by the Diocese of Colombo in Sri Lanka, which helps with education for women and children living in the tea plantation areas, where the Anglican Church has been active for over a century. Programmes like this enable us as individuals to feel we can make a practical contribution to mission in the poorest parts of the world. At a time when as a nation we are so concerned about the uncertainty we face in terms of our relationships with European countries, it is good that we continue to lift our eyes to the world beyond.

In our Gospel reading Jesus said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to give good news to the poor." We pray, Lord, that you will enable us to grasp the challenge of mission both in this place of Wimbledon and around the world, to know what is the part given to each of us, and in the words of Mother Theresa enable us to help meet the needs of others, wherever we are. Amen.

John Neilson