

SERMON TRINITY IV, YEAR A

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17th July 2011

St George's Paris

Readings: Wisdom 12:13, 16 – 19; Romans 8:12 – 25;
Matthew 13: 24 – 30, 36 – 43.

Two days away from lift off on my journey to Angola, I can't help but think of what the church there has asked me to speak about, especially as it will shed light on today's Gospel. My Angolan brothers and sisters as a topic something new in the context of my home church, namely, "Missão Integral", in English "Integral or Holistic Mission". How many of you have heard about it? If you have perhaps we should change the name on the airline ticket! In fact, I am teasing you slightly, as the movement arose in Latin America, a part of which I know rather well indeed - Brazil. 'Holistic mission' was an Evangelical response to the social problems and injustice of dictator-ridden Latin America of the 70's and 80's and beyond, an Evangelical alternative, if you like, to Liberation Theology without the heavy Marxist politics and theory. It also constitutes a critique of what one may call a U.S./Western inspired "consumerist" Evangelical approach to mission and church, whereby what matters is the numbers game of how many people are being converted and turned into disciples, the quantitative 'saving of souls', if you like,

and how many new churches are being planted. Mission, say the proponents the alternative holistic approach, does not just boil down to the Great Commission of Matthew 28: "Go and make disciples of all nations." We a more nuanced and theological understanding, as well as one embedded in practice.

Whole meal bread, or "pão integral" as the Latin Americans call it, is bread without any of the original grain taken out of it. Integral Mission is in the words of the dictum of the 1974 Congress of Lausanne, "the whole Gospel, for the whole human person, for the whole of humanity." Well, that's a feat – only God could possibly do that! What it boils down to is not an original idea at all, namely, that it is not enough for the church to proclaim the 'Good News' in words, it must incarnate, manifest, demonstrate even, the Gospel in all that it *is, does and says*. What does it matter if, say, a certain suburb of São Paulo is the fastest growing and most densely populated centre of evangelical churches in the world, if the churches do not make a difference to the society around them and are introverted by a narrowly defined conception of mission? The church has to live what it preaches, so that it can preach what it lives – reflect on that! In short, 'Integral Mission' requires that the church refuses to chop up the Gospel, but to see its resonance in the whole of life.

“What’s that gotta do with the Gospel”, as one of my south London brothers at theological college used to say, or perhaps, with today’s Gospel. Well, the short answer is “the Kingdom”! The key to understanding the movement of ‘Integral Mission’ is the Kingdom. The *Kairos* moment, the appointed time, the decisive hour, has come; the Kingdom has already arrived with Christ in the middle of human history. Remember Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth at the start of his ministry, reading the words of messianic liberation, and saying “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4.21). Although, today’s text encourages us to be patient and not expect a final resolution until the consummation of all things, it is not denying the actual presence of Christ and His Kingdom in history.

Bad Christian thinking has led people to spiritualize the Kingdom, turning it into a disincarnate, life-after-death reality. Yet, Christ does not promise us transferal to Heaven, but a “new heaven and a new earth” (2 Peter 3.13), not a disincarnate soul, but bodily resurrection. It is not we humans who will go and live with God, but God, Heaven, has and will come down to us (John 14:18). We are to pray to the Father, “Thy Kingdom come [in its fullness], thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”; heaven and earth are to meet each other, because heaven has already kissed earth in Christ. Jesus commands us,

“seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness” (Mtt 6.33). So whatever the presence maybe of the weeds amidst the wheat, the authority of God over history is already certain. If this is so, there is no evil that we cannot confront, or that has ultimate power over us – not even political corruption and totalitarianism (Eph 6:12).

From such a perspective an individualist conception of salvation is not sufficient. Personal redemption is only one aspect of salvation, which needs to be more broadly conceived as the reign of God in its life-giving plenitude, the coming of the Kingdom. It is not to be reduced to mere individual salvation, but the restoration of the human race and the whole of creation, in the words of St Paul, “to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth” (Eph.1.10). The primary task of the church is not to convert people – that is surely God’s prerogative, the work of the Holy Spirit – but to proclaim the Kingdom, invite participation in it, and the healing that comes through it. Numbers of church members and church plants are as nothing without working for the inculcation of the values of the Kingdom in the one’s local community and society.

You can see what would happen if today’s passage were to fall into the wrong hands: patience would be interpreted as Christian passivity: “Do not try

pulling up the weeds, for you may pull up the wheat at the same time." The result is resignation in the face of evil, instead of struggle and engagement. Yet, this text can hardly be a recipe for passivity. For as St Paul says, "if you live according to sinful nature, you will die" (Rom. 8:13) It is rather an invitation to the church to avoid intolerance and fanaticism, summary judgments and easy excommunications, a blind alley that tempts some churches within the Anglican Communion at present. Yes, discernment needs to be exercised, and it must always be remembered that the Kingdom is already, but still yet to come in its fullness. Nevertheless, where would our integrity be if we did not struggle for Gospel values in this world? In fact, this parable is teaching Christians how to live with the rejection of the Gospel. We are to imitate the graciousness of God that our reading from Wisdom talks of: "you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance" (Wisd.12.18) This was not a call to give up and disengage.

Proponents of Holistic Mission are keen to combat any resignation from the world or focus on a Kingdom purely of the future. Such a view is like "merely picking up survivors from a shipwreck in a hostile sea", says the Wheaton Declaration of 1983. It goes on, "Evil is not only in the human heart but also in social structures." For example, "poverty is not a necessary evil but often the result of social,

economic, political, and religious systems marked by injustice, exploitation, and oppression." It adds, "even though we may believe that our calling is only to proclaim the Gospel and not get involved in political and other actions, our very non-involvement lends tacit support to the existing order. There is no escape: either we challenge the evil structures of society or we support them."

That means changing our paradigm of mission. Too many churches in the past have just treated the symptoms of social malaise, with a culture of handouts and assistance. Of that approach, the Brazilian Evangelical philosopher Ricardo Gouvea says: "[It] does not resolve the social and political problems because it does not touch the crux of the matter, it does not reach the structures, it does not challenge the powerful. On the contrary, mission by doling out assistance fits perfectly into the model of the oppressive powers in society. As such, no one battles with the churches, because they are not a threat to the political and economic powers of this world. If they were, they would be persecuted." Now that's a strange idea!

So let us be grateful that our Angolan brothers and sisters have called us into this dialogue. We have something to learn from their courageous interest in the movement of Holistic Mission. We may ask how

we envisage mission in our parishes as 'holistic', freed to relate the Kingdom to any aspect of the basic needs of our lives and those around us. How is our presence as a Christian community also a sign of the transformation of the society and communities in which we live? How do we as a community live what we preach, and preach what we live? Without impatience or intolerance, while allowing God to be the Lord of both history and the church, we are called to proclaim and propagate the Good News of the Kingdom, and so be agents of God's transformation. The church is to manifest the Kingdom to the world and change the world with the Kingdom, proclaiming the joy of the plenitude and justice that is already breaking in amongst us. Let us pray for the church in Angola that the Spirit may shape their mission and that they may remain patient, yet active in their hope for the Kingdom. Amen.