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# Evangelism in the City

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A couple of years ago I wrote a book entitled *Foolishness to the Greeks* in which I tried to explore the issues arising in a missionary encounter between the gospel and our contemporary western culture. I tried in this to bring to bear the experience of a foreign missionary in India upon my present task as pastor of an inner-city congregation in Birmingham, England. In a friendly review of the book, the editor of the *Expository Times* challenged me to say how I would apply the rather abstract reasoning of the book to the concrete business of an ordinary inner-city parish. It was a very reasonable question, but not an easy one to answer. I felt bound to respond, not because I was confident about having the right answers, but because I could not evade the question.

The small congregation with which I now minister worships in a Victorian building situated immediately opposite the Winson Green Prison. In an early document the area served was defined by the following boundaries: "HM Prison, the Lunatic Asylum, the railway and James Watt's famous factory." It is now an area of very high unemployment, an exceptionally high proportion of single-parent families, and a rich ethnic mix in which native Anglo-Saxons form a minority. In relation to the nation as a whole, it would be described as an area of severe deprivation. In terms of absolute poverty, or, for example, in comparison with the Indian villages where most of my ministry has been exercised, its people have considerable material resources. Every home has a television and this provides, for most of the time, the visible center of life in the home. The commodity in shortest supply is hope.

The older inhabitants speak much of earlier times when there was a closely packed community in which neighbors knew and helped each other. Much of this was destroyed in the name of "improvement." The terrace houses were pulled down and their inhabitants forced to move to the suburbs. One 18-story tower-block was built; those who inhabit it have one main ambition, namely, to escape. Older people comfort themselves with nostalgic memories of the past, and are fearful of the present. For young people, especially for those of the Afro-Caribbean community, there is little reason for hope about the future. There is a famine of hope.

We have good news to tell. Before we think about how it is communicated, it is well to begin with a negative point. It is *not* communicated if the question uppermost in our minds is about the survival of the

church in the inner city. Because our society is a pagan society, and because Christians have in general failed to realize how radical is the contradiction between the Christian vision and the assumptions that we breathe in from every part of our shared existence, we allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking of the church as one of the many "good causes" which need our support and which will collapse if they are not adequately supported. If our "evangelism" is at bottom an effort to shore up the tottering fabric of the church (and it sometimes looks like that) then it will not be heard as good news. The church is in God's keeping. We do not have the right to be anxious about it. We have our Lord's word that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The nub of the matter is that we have been chosen to be the bearers of good news for the whole world, and the question is simply whether we are faithful in communicating it.

But how to communicate? In my experience the hardest part is trying to communicate to the native Anglo-Saxon. The others are, in general, people who know that God is the great reality, even if we may judge that their knowledge of him is imperfect. To the Muslim the gospel is shocking but at least it is significant. To Hindus and Sikhs it is something really worth listening to, even if one finally decides that it is just another version of the "religion" which is common to us all. Many of the Afro-Caribbean people in our inner cities are devout Christians whose faith, hope, and love put most of us to shame. But for the majority of the natives, the Christian story is an old fairy-tale which they have put behind them. It is not even worth listening to. One shuts the door and turns back to the television screen where endless images of the "good life" are on tap at all hours.

How can this strange story of God made flesh, of a crucified Savior, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world which can be satisfactorily explained and managed without the hypothesis of God? I know of only one clue to the answering of that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: a congregation which believes it.

Does that sound too simplistic? I don't believe it is. Evangelism is not some kind of technique by means of which people are persuaded to change their minds and think like us. Evangelism is the telling of good news, but what changes people's minds and converts their wills is always a mysterious work of the sovereign Holy Spirit, and we are not permitted to know more than a little of his secret working. But — and this is the point — the Holy Spirit is present in the believing congregation both gathered for praise and the offering up of spiritual sacrifice, and scattered throughout the community to bear the love of God into every secular happening and meeting. It is they who scatter the seeds of hope around, and even if the greater part falls on barren ground, there will be a few that begin to

germinate, to create at least a questioning and a seeking, and perhaps to lead someone to inquire about the source from which these germs of hope came. Although it may seem simplistic, I most deeply believe that it is fundamental to recognize that what brings men and women and children to know Jesus as Lord and Savior is always the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, always beyond our understanding or control, always the result of a presence, a reality which both draws and challenges — the reality who is in fact the living God himself. And God's presence is promised and granted in the midst of the believing, worshipping, celebrating, caring congregation. There is no other hermeneutic of the gospel.

The first priority, therefore, is the cherishing and nourishing of such a congregation in a life of worship, of teaching, and of mutual pastoral care so that the new life in Christ becomes more and more for them the great and controlling reality. That life will necessarily be different from the life of the neighborhood, but the important thing is that it be different in the right way and not in the wrong way. It is different in the wrong way if it reflects cultural norms and assumptions that belong to another time or place; its language and style must be that of the neighborhood. But yet if it is *not* different from the life around it, it is salt which has lost its saltiness. We ought to recognize, perhaps more sharply than we often do, that there *must* be a profound difference between a community which adores God as the great reality, and one where it is assumed that God can be ignored.

But here a problem arises which is perhaps specially pressing in deprived areas. It happens over and over again, and it has happened throughout history, that the effect of conversion and Christian nurture is that a man or woman acquires new energies, a new hope and a new sense of dignity. And it can follow that their next step is to leave the area where they see only depression and despair and seek a better place. They leave the inner city and move to the leafy suburb. The congregation which bears the good news is weakened by its very success.

This means, surely, that in all our preaching and teaching about the hope which the gospel makes possible, we have to keep steadily in view the fact that what the gospel offers is not just hope for the individual but hope for the world. Concretely I think this means that the congregation must be so deeply and intimately involved in the secular concerns of the neighborhood that it becomes clear to everyone that no one or nothing is outside the range of God's love in Jesus. Christ's message, the original gospel, was about the coming of the kingdom of God, that is to say God's kingly rule over the whole of creation and the whole of humankind. That is the only authentic gospel. And that means that every part of human life is within the range of the gospel message: in respect of everything, the gospel brings the necessity for choice between the rule of God and the

negation of that rule. If the good news is to be authentically communicated, it must be clear that the church is concerned about the rule of God and not about itself. It must be clear, that is, that the local congregation cares for the well-being of the whole community and not just for itself. This will — in the contemporary situation of such areas as Winson Green — lead to much involvement in local issues of all kinds of which it is not necessary in an article of this kind to give examples.

But, and this reminder is very necessary, this involvement must not become something that muffles the distinctive note of the gospel. The church ought not to fit so comfortably into the situation that it is simply welcomed as one of the well-meaning agencies of philanthropy. I think this warning is necessary because of the frequency with which I hear “kingdom” set against “church” in discussions about our role in society. I have insisted that the church’s message is about the kingdom. The church is called to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God’s kingly rule. But it is the *church* to which this calling is given. We have too often heard “kingdom issues” set against “church issues” in a way which conceals the fact that “kingdom issues” are being conceived not in terms of the crucified and risen Jesus, but in terms of some contemporary ideology. In the heyday of progressive liberal capitalism, “advancing the kingdom” meant enabling more and more people to share in its blessings. Today the phrase is more generally colored by Marxist ideas about the oppressed as the bearers of liberation. One has much sympathy with this in view of the contemporary attempt to persuade us that the way to maximize public good is to give free rein to private greed. We live in a society which is being ideologically polarized by this attempt as never before. It is not easy to keep one’s head. But it is essential to keep all our thinking centered in the fact that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus — incarnate, crucified, risen, and coming in judgment. The life of the church in the midst of the world is to be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom only insofar as its whole life is centered in that reality. Every other concept of the kingdom belongs to the category of false messiahs about which the Gospels have much to say.

To put it even more sharply: the hope, of which the church is called to be the bearer in the midst of a famine of hope, is a radically other-worldly hope. Knowing that Jesus *is* king and that he *will* come to reign, it fashions its life and invites the whole community to fashion its life in the light of this reality, because every other way of living is based on illusion. It thus creates signs, parables, foretastes, appetizers of the kingdom in the midst of the hopelessness of the world. It makes it possible to act both hopefully and realistically in a world without hope, a world which trades in illusions. If this radically other-worldly dimension of the church’s witness is missing, then all its efforts in the life of the community are merely a series of minor eddies in a current which sweeps relentlessly in the opposite direction.

But if one insists as I am doing upon the radically other-worldly nature of the Christian hope, it is necessary at once to protect this against a misunderstanding which has brought this aspect of the Christian message into disrepute. A recognition of this other-worldly element has often been linked with a privatization of religion characteristic of our post-Enlightenment culture. When this happens, the church is seen not as a bearer of hope for the whole community, but as a group of people concerned about their own ultimate safety. It is thus seen as something essentially anti-social. And, especially in a religiously plural society, this attracts justifiable censure. "Evangelism" is then easily identified as "proselytism"—the natural attempt of every human community to add to its own strength at the expense of others. From the point of view of people concerned with the total welfare of a human community, "evangelism" is seen as something at best irrelevant and at worst destructive of human unity.

Is there a valid distinction between "evangelism" and "proselytism"? It must be admitted that in many discussions of this subject I have sensed that the distinction was very simple: evangelism is what we do and proselytism is what the others do. But I think it is possible to get beyond this obvious illusion. Everything depends upon the point which I made at the beginning, namely that the conversion of a human mind and will to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior is strictly a work of the sovereign Holy Spirit of God, a mystery always beyond our full comprehension, for which our words and deeds may be—by the grace of God—the occasions but never the sufficient causes. Anything in the nature of manipulation, any exploiting of weakness, any use of coercion, anything other than the "manifestation of the truth . . . in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2) has no place in true evangelism. Of course all who know Jesus as Lord and Savior will rejoice when the company of those who love him grows. But they will also know that Jesus is much greater than any single understanding of him and that it therefore behooves us to make no final judgments until the Judge himself comes. It is Jesus alone who decides who will be summoned to be with us in the company of his witnesses.

If we are clear about the distinction between evangelism and proselytism, we shall be in a position to say something constructive about the matter of evangelism among people of other faiths. I have mentioned the fact that in the area of my present pastoral charge there is a large proportion of families of Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh faith. I have said that I find it much easier to talk with them on matters of religious faith than with most of the natives. But I am also frequently told, sometimes by Christian clergymen, that evangelism among my neighbors of other faiths is an improper activity and that I ought to confine myself to "dialogue". I find this exceedingly odd. We live in one neighborhood. For weal or woe we share the same life. We wrestle with the same problems. It is, surely, a

very peculiar form of racism which would affirm that the good news entrusted to us is strictly for white Anglo-Saxons! After the last annual Assembly of the United Reformed Church which had given much attention to evangelism, one of the participants wrote to the church's monthly paper to ask why it was that this word was reserved for our relations with unchurched Anglo-Saxons while in respect of our relations with people of other faiths we spoke only of "dialogue." The question was not answered.

How has it come that "evangelism" and "dialogue" are presented as opposed alternatives? Surely because both have been misunderstood. Evangelism has been misunderstood as proselytism. There is reason for this and all of us who seek to be true bearers of the gospel need to take note. If evangelism is the attempt of a religious group to enlarge itself by cajoling or manipulating those unable to resist, then it is rightly suspect. But a believing, celebrating, loving Christian fellowship, fully involved in the life of the wider community and sharing its burdens and sorrows, cannot withhold from others the secret of its hope and certainly cannot commit the monstrous absurdity of supposing that the hope by which it lives applies only to those of a particular ethnic origin.

And the word "dialogue" too needs to be examined. No sharing of the good news takes place except in the context of a shared human life, and that means in part, the context of shared conversation. In such conversation we talk about real things and we try both to communicate what we know and to learn what we do not know. The sharing of the good news about the kingdom is part of that conversation and cannot happen without it. But why do we have to substitute the high-sounding word "dialogue" at this point? Is it because we fail in the simple business of ordinary human conversation? I confess that in the Winson Green neighborhood we have not established any "dialogue" between representatives of the different faiths, but we do have quite a lot of conversation. It is a kind of conversation which is not an alternative to but the occasion for sharing our hope, and it leads some people to ask the sort of questions that lead further.

Some, but not many. I certainly cannot tell any story of "success" in terms of numbers. I guess that this is the experience of many working in such areas. The church remains small and vulnerable. I do not find in this ground for discouragement. The kingdom is not ours. The times and seasons are not in our management. It is enough to know that Jesus reigns and shall reign, and to be privileged to share this assurance with our neighbors and to be able to do and say the small deeds and words that make it possible for others to believe.