

MISSION: BLESSING THE WORLD WITH THE TOUCH OF GOD

Sermon preached in St. James' Church, New York City, on World Mission Sunday,
by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, SubDean and Professor of Mission & World Christianity
at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church
on the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, 11 February 2007
Year C, Epiphany 6 (RCL & BCP): Jer. 17.5-10; 1 Cor. 15.12-20; Luke 6.17-26

**"Blessed are you . . . blessed are you . . . blessed are you . . ." –
so says Jesus in today's gospel.**

**This morning I suggest that Christian mission means joining that *blessing* action of
God beyond the boundaries of our own communities,
going beyond boundaries to join and meet God among people who are very
different from us,
so that together we can create a new community where we discover Christ
anew.**

That mission movement of God is alive and well at St. James,

and I rejoice and give thanks for the opportunity to be with you here on your
celebration of World Mission Sunday,
an annual observance established by the 1997 General Convention.

As a parish you have a mission statement in which you describe yourselves as "a
community that actively shares the love of Jesus Christ with each other,
our city and the world."

You've worked out ten goals from that mission statement,
some of them internal to your community life, some of them related to the city,
and some of them beyond,
so there you are using the term *mission* in the common sense of *everything* God is
calling you to do as a parish.

And then on your website you also use the word *mission* in a more particular sense:
you have a page entitled "Mission," where you talk about opportunities to serve
others with compassion and justice beyond the parish – in the
neighborhood, the city and the world.

**Those two simultaneous uses of the term *mission* are very common throughout our
church:**

mission is everything God calls us to do – all the way from the sacristy to Malawi!

and mission is something more particular– it's the reaching out:

reaching beyond *who* we are to people who are not yet part of us,
reaching beyond *where* we are to other neighborhoods, regions and continents.

You say as much in your seventh parish goal, which is to

"Continue our historic involvement in mission and expand our outreach at local,
national and international levels" – there's the word: *outreach!*

That reaching out is intimately related to the root of the word *mission*, which comes from
the Latin verb *to send*:

we reach out beyond ourselves because God has *sent* us to reach the world.

So we might define mission in this way: as *sending and being sent beyond significant boundaries of human experience* to – to do what? –
to share in word and deed the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ in
the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's that reaching beyond ourselves that distinguishes mission from ministry.
Put another way, mission is ministry in the dimension of difference.

Conviction of being sent by God was certainly what moved Jesus to reach out.

In today's gospel Jesus has just come down from an all-night vigil on a mountain during
which he named those who would be especially close to him in his
mission,

and now he is in the full tide of missional reaching:

touching those afflicted with disease

and then proclaiming the blessedness of God on the poor, the mourning, the
afflicted and the persecuted.

What is this blessing that Jesus proclaims?

Partly Jesus is declaring that God takes the side of the downtrodden against those who are
oppressing them.

Partly Jesus is proclaiming God's favor on those whom God has just healed,
and so confirming the deed of healing with a word of embrace.

Most broadly, though, Jesus is offering the touch of God in people's lives, saying to them
in effect:

*God knows you, God knows your name, you are not forgotten,
God is here with you.*

Jesus saying, "Blessed are you," is very similar to Jesus saying
"The kingdom of God has come very near to you."

**This blessing movement of God in Jesus is the content of mission:
joining with Jesus in offering the touch of God in people's lives.**

When parishioners of St. James travel to Malawi, you are saying with Jesus,
"Blessed are you! AIDS and poverty are here, but also God is here."

When St. James' parishioners travel to Haiti, you are saying with Jesus,
"Blessed are you! Civil society is collapsing, but also the kingdom of God is very
near to you."

**Mission as offering the touch of God puts me in mind of several longterm Episcopal
missionaries I recently visited in their places of service.**

Monica Vega and Heidi Schulz are two nuns who together serve AIDS orphans at the
Isibindi Children's Ministry at Ilinge,
a desolate settlement of society's cast-offs in the Diocese of Grahamstown in
South Africa.

They have built the ministry from scratch and trained a remarkable group of women care-
givers who previously had no professional identity.

Isibindi offers the children an after-school refuge where they can do their homework,
make friends and build community.

When I asked Monica what students from General Seminary could do if they came for internships, her response was striking:

"It would be such a good place for students. I have no jobs for them. They would come and be with the poor, and maybe they would feel useless like the poor here feel useless. In feeling useless they could meet Jesus, because Jesus is here, and their role would be to come and know that Jesus is here."

That is mission as presence: simply being present, offering and receiving the touch of God, the blessing of God.

Just last month I was with **Paul-Gordon and Lynne Chandler**, who with their children are Episcopal Church missionaries in Cairo, Egypt.

Paul-Gordon is growing an Anglican and ecumenical parish of expatriates from all over the world in Maadi, in south Cairo,

so the gospel is being shared and proclaimed over many boundaries of difference.

At the same time, he is pursuing dialogue both in the parish and the diocese with the Muslim majority of Cairo,

bringing people together to discuss differences and commonalities

and so working for the reconciliation that is at the heart of the gospel.

He's about to come out with a book on a person in Lebanon who prays and writes as a follower of Jesus within Islam.

Paul-Gordon's mission brings together both proclamation and dialogue in the world's rich diversity of religious faiths.

Such vision and service highlight the crucial contribution of the longterm missionary.

Especially in the theology of ministry expressed through the 1979 Prayerbook, our church has realized that every member of the church has a ministry and that reaching out in mission is the responsibility of the whole people of God – and certainly that is happening in your multifaceted outreach from St. James.

At the same time, the longterm missionary is a crucial link in the chain of relationship, because the longterm missionary gets to know the language and the culture, becomes expert in the social and political scene and develops a history of working with the local church.

The missionary becomes an important link between the church at home and the church where he or she serves.

Indeed, some of the difficulty in mutual understanding between the Episcopal Church today and some other parts of the Anglican Communion

may arise from the fact that the missionary sending of the Episcopal Church declined radically from the early 1970s to the late 1990s.

Today the Episcopal Church is sending missionaries again, and that might be a vocation some in this congregation may be called to consider.

A book came out recently entitled *Passionaries: Turning Compassion into Action*.

It highlights the stories and leaders behind 35 major non-profit organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Teach for America, Senior Corps, Mercy Ships, and the Make-a-Wish Foundation.

Author Barbara Metzler defines a *passionary* as a person "inspired passionately through vision and compassion to actively change the world for the better."

Metzler's new word obviously borrows on the word *missionary* but without the religious connotation,

and I would add only that the marvel of missionaries is that they bring together just that kind of passionate vision with a spiritual centeredness and commitment to God in Christ.

Your missionaries are themselves passionaries!

Obviously, there are almost as many kinds of mission as there are missionaries:

missionaries in education and medicine,
missionaries who evangelize and pastor congregations,
missionaries in public health and renewable energy,
missionaries in interfaith dialogue and leadership formation –
but all of them alike are offering a touch of God,
saying or acting out Jesus' words, "Blessed are you."

And all missionaries also are *receiving* a touch of God, hearing God say to them in their mission work, "Blessed are you too: in your going out the kingdom of God has come near to you as well as to the people who received you."

The universal testimony of missionaries is that they learn more than they teach, they receive more than they give, and they come away transformed.

And so it is here also at St. James in the mission outreaches that Steven Smith is coordinating as associate rector for mission.

Yesterday I talked with Katharine Fleming, who chairs your mission committee and who went on a mission trip to your companions in the Diocese of Southern Malawi.

She rejoiced in your relationships with Bp. James Tengtenga and with Archdeacon Charles Masina, whom you brought to St. James and generously sponsored for study at General Seminary last fall, a partnership for which we at General are very grateful.

Katharine said, "It was transforming for me because I now have far greater sympathy and compassion for very poor people."

In talking about your relationship with Haiti, Helen Nickerson noted the obstacles you've had to overcome in getting a relationship underway when that society is in such political turmoil.

"But it really was a transforming experience for me," she said, "There's a feeling of infinite hope and possibility that comes, and you can't plan that: there's just a hope that comes."

It is a joy for me to recollect in all this the vision and contribution of your former rector and my former bishop John Bowen Coburn,

in whose honor you plan to rename East Hall as Coburn Hall.

Your rector Brenda Husson writes in this month's *Epistle* that part of John's vision was to "build a bridge between a rich parish and those in Harlem,"

and during his tenure the outreach budget doubled and the parish's grants program came into being.

When later as Bishop of Massachusetts, John asked Desmond Tutu about a diocesan partnership,

Tutu suggested it was important to strengthen the church in the new Zimbabwe so that it could strengthen that nation to be a model for the new South Africa that Tutu and others were longing for.

A partnership with Zimbabwe was formed out of that suggestion,

and my wife Jane and I were among the first missionaries in that partnership, along with our four young children,

and John Coburn was a fine pastor to us when he came and visited during that time.

Our Christian lives, our sense of the church and ministry, and our commitments in the world have all been transformed by our years of association with the church in Zimbabwe and southern Africa.

Years later it was striking to see that among the St. James' grants one year was a grant to St. David's Mission, Bonda, precisely the place where Jane and I served in the Diocese of Manicaland!

**And so the world mission to which God calls you
and the world mission in which you passionately are engaged is a mutual mission**

in which St. James is mobilizing time, talent and treasure for the transformation of the world

and in which in the words of Paul you, beholding the glory of God in the wider world, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Thanks be to God!