

MISSION: SACRAMENT OF THE GLOBAL CHRIST

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler as the Keynote for World Mission Week
in the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia

Wednesday, 31 January 2001

Mission of the Church II: Isaiah 49.5-13; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 28.16-20

Five days with a group of Episcopal missionaries preparing for service in various parts of the world —

that was a privilege that I had in Santa Fe two weeks ago.

These are people that you and I, all of us, are sending out through the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society,

and it is by virtue of that sending that they are our missionaries.

Let me introduce them to you.

- *Scott and Carol Kellerman* from California are on their way to work with Batwa people in Uganda.

Scott is a physician, and Carol a spiritual director.

The Batwa are a hunting-and-gathering people who have been expelled by the Ugandan government from a rain forest to make way for a national park —

they're on their own now in the modern Uganda, suddenly facing diseases they have not known before, including AIDS.

The Anglican Church of Uganda has asked for medical and spiritual personnel to help in ministering to the Batwa,

with a wish, ultimately, that the Batwa be permitted to return to the rain forest.

- *Mary Ham* has an MBA in finance, explored Zen Buddhism earlier in her life, and came to a Christian commitment while working in Eastern Europe; she's now helping develop a parish in South Africa.

- *Judith Toffey* is a Connecticut priest on her way to teach at an Anglican girls school in Amman, Jordan.

- *Vernon and Francis Wilson* of Florida are on their way to the Virgin Islands. where Vernon, an internationally known jeweler, will help establish a vocational school, and Francis will work on parish development.

- *Paul and Kate Tilley* from the Church of England are at the American parish in Waterloo, Belgium, where Paul is youth director.

Kate is working with refugees and tells moving stories of Muslims coming to Christ through a local ecumenical outreach.

- *Ann Makarias* from Massachusetts is heading to Mpwapwa, Tanzania, to help prospective seminary students with their English.

- Just out of Duke Law and Divinity Schools, *Gary Eichelberger* is on his way to Gaul Theological College in Harare, Zimbabwe,

where he will teach about truth and reconciliation ministry as he's studied it in South Africa and Rwanda.

- *Barry and Kay Wickham* from the Anglican Church of Canada are coordinating El Hogar in Honduras, a large multi-site school for boys, and they're struggling with the tension between institution-building and pastoral care.

Just out of Chapel Hill undergraduate, *Tom Murphy* is going to help them, and he already knows Spanish.

- *Sally Riley* from West Virginia is on her way to work with the Mothers' Union in Kenya.

Fourteen people, ten households, eight women, six men,

twelve laypeople and two clergy —

four people in their 20s, two in their 30s, five in their 40s, and three in their 50s.

Most of them have given up settled and prosperous careers, some have sold houses, some will be living thousands of miles from their young adult children — who knows, that could be blessing as well as bane! — but

In other words, it's still happening! —

people are still giving up close to everything to go into cross-cultural, international mission,

not only through DFMS, but through the South American Missionary Society, Anglican Frontier Missions, Episcopal World Mission and other agencies as well.

You may be *amazed* at that this is still happening in the year of our Lord 2001, and I have introduced these missionaries to you by name to heighten your amazement!

Despite the fact that as a seminary community you gather daily before an inscription of the Great Commission around your great window, you may be *puzzled* that people continue to respond to it, even now; in fact, you may experience that inscription as one of the great anomalies of your life here in Alexandria.

The persistence of Christian world mission may strike you as a *mystery*.

Mission is indeed a mystery, according to the writer to the Ephesians:

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation . . .

that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

Mystery here means a secret working of God that is contrary to expectation. So what *is* the mystery the writer is reaching for?

The writer is reaching to declare that what God has done in Christ Jesus has expanded the circle of God's covenant to include all the peoples, all the nations, all the *ta ethne* who were synonymous with Gentiles, those who traditionally were *not* included in the covenant with Abraham.

God's act in Christ was not secret or private but open and public.

It's effect, though, was a mystery, for God's universal embrace was not obvious at first, but it emerged for some as they sought to live out the implications of the Christ whom they knew.

One of those was Paul, whose career seemed a mystery bordering on outrage to those who experienced a ferocious persecutor of the faith becoming one of its most zealous evangelists.

The mystery is fundamentally a mission mystery,

for it concerns the mission of God

God who so longs for relationship, who so longs for reconciled community with *all* people, with the *whole* human family, that God came among us in Christ Jesus.

Jesus was the ultimate mystery,

for in Jesus the very presence of God was so wholly present and so transparently evident in a human being

that it was clear that when one met Jesus one had met God.

The mystery of Christ among us, the mystery of outreach to the Gentiles —

for Paul or the paulinist writing in his name these two mysteries are the one single mission mystery of the missionary God reaching out to reconcile an estranged universe,

for this is the longing God who languishes in solitude but who is fulfilled in community.

For Jew and Gentile in the first century, this mission mystery was a stumbling-block — that was why it had to be advocated, urged and argued among the churches.

Today this mystery is still a stumbling-block among the churches, but for different reasons arising from the intervening history.

How can Jesus' command to go into all the world still be a valid mandate after all the mistakes Christians have made and the sins they have committed in carrying out that mandate?

How can it be still okay for Christians from the Global North and specifically the United States to go on mission to other countries when American culture and technology are already displacing the cultures of so many people around the world,

so much so that the word "okay" is, in fact, the world's most widely known word and Coca-Cola the world's most widely known name?

How can world mission still be a valid enterprise in the midst of a plethora of religious paths, at least some of which may offer important insights into spiritual reality?

I suggest to you tonight that entering into dialogue with these problems is a central mystery of Christian faith and Anglican life,

and that they mystery into which we are being invited is the mystery of sacrament.

A missionary goes, lives and serves as a sacrament of the global Christ,
 the global Christ who longs to reconcile,
 who longs to widen the compass of God's embrace,
 who longs for that consummated community we see in the Revelation to St. John
 the Divine, where gathered in praise before God's presence are *all* the
 tribes and languages and peoples and nations.

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God.

Baptism and eucharist are central sacraments for us,
 but as William Porcher DuBose of Sewanee pointed out early in the last century,
 the sacramentality of the rites takes root within the Church, the community, which
 is the *primary* sacrament of Christ.

As a member of that central sacrament, every Christian, I suggest, is called to
 sacramental living,

to live as an outward and visible sign
 of the inward and spiritual grace of Christ that transforms the self and the world.

The international cross-cultural missionary expresses that sacramentality in the encounter
 between languages, peoples and cultures,

bearing in his or her own person the longing of Christ to meet, to reach out, to
 touch, to reconcile, to heal, to relate, to relate and yet more, to relate.

World mission is a sacrament of the global Christ.

**When I asked your fourteen outgoing missionaries what mission meant to them,
 they said things like:**

Mission means being with people.

Mission means forming relationships.

Mission means being before doing.

Mission means meeting Christ with another people group.

These are not aggressive, triumphalist views of mission —

the lessons of mission history you want to urge on them have already been learned
 and internalized very deeply.

No, their views of mission are, I suggest, sacramental views,

reaching for a way of being with the other in Christ that honors deeply the other in
 the dimension of difference,

yet witnesses to the mystery of the Christ who restores people to unity with God
 and one another over all the boundaries and alienations that divide us.

Like every sacrament in practice, the practice of the mission sacrament is flawed.

Just as you've been to plenty of botched baptisms and deadly eucharists,

so also the sacramentality of global mission is imperfectly expressed.

and the varieties of that imperfection are manifold —

– rhetoric about receiving as well as giving but precious little action beyond the
 occasional international speaker,

– outreach to human need often buried under pressures to raise more and more money,

– continuing patterns of paternalism and dependence,

- preoccupation with tasks at the expense of relationships,
- apparent deafness to cultural nuance, and so on.

All of this is real, but it is far from exhausting the totality of mission today or in any day.

One of the many occasions on which I've sensed this sacramental reality of mission was in Zimbabwe, where my family and I served as missionaries of the Episcopal Church.

Some time later I was researching the interaction of gospel and culture in the all-night vigils that are revitalizing Shona Christianity.

After leading a song about the kingdom of God during an ecumenical vigil, a Methodist woman, mother Nyabereka, stood up and said in Shona:

That's the kingdom we are now seeing together with our dear friend [referring to me, Titus] from over the ocean. Doesn't it seem astonishing to us? There is no other skin [color] in here but only he who gave himself saying, "Let me go and see my friends." He left his parents, he left his relatives, he left his friends, his wife has been left behind, for loving us. That's why there is a *verse* that says, "You are people's friends if you do what I say." We feel credible [*Tiri kunzwa kutendeseka*]. We feel happy.

As you can imagine, I was startled and humbled, but I think I was being seen there as something like a sacrament of the global Christ.

Sometimes the sacramentality of mission issues in a sacramental rite.

Perhaps the most moving eucharist I've been part of was one celebrated with a Shona family beside the smoldering ruins of their thatched home that had been torched by Zimbabwean troops in a campaign to evict squatters.

After fighting in the Liberation War, Gilbert Matinenga had settled on land he thought belonged to his ancestors.

Bringing their infant son to Bonda to be baptized, Gilbert and his wife Farai had named the child Freedom to celebrate the independence era.

It turned out they were occupying land that had been sold to an African middle-class family, and on this day government troops came to burn them out.

Visiting them in the catastrophe, I loaded bags of their harvested maize into the car to store at the church.

What else was there to do? Well, there was eucharist to do!

On the cleared ground of the homestead, together with their now homeless neighbors and with the now ironically named Freedom squalling in his mother's arms, we celebrated the supper of the Lord amid the ruins and proclaimed Christ's death and resurrection until he comes again.

I never saw that family again, but what we did there that day seemed the mission of God in that place.

**Visiting victims of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras,
Phoebe Griswold, spouse of our presiding bishop, saw her outreach in sacramental terms:**

"Mud was everywhere. Homes were awash in it. People walked knee deep in slime. Another mud line was not only on the homes but on the people as well. Oh the

children, you could see up to their little knees, a whole different color, covered with mud. We, Episcopal Relief and Development and the Diocese of Honduras, under the leadership of Bishop Frade, traveled down washed out gullies and went where no other secular organization had been. We listened to peoples' stories. To be heard in such a crisis is in itself an act of healing. Also, we distributed food to families where the Diocese had a list of every name because they knew each family. I gave out bags of food, saying quietly to myself, 'The Body of Christ.'^{*}

Those fourteen missionaries, some of whom are in the air en route to their assignments right now as we gather here —

they have intuited that they will find Christ in a new way on the frontier of encounter with another,
 they have anticipated the release of Christ's intimate and transforming power in that encounter, both for their cross-cultural partners and for themselves,
 they feel launched on new trajectories in their lives and ministries.
 So they go not to fix, not to direct, not to reorganize, not to dominate.
 Rather they go to meet and embrace,
 to live with others in solidarity,
 to share the Christ they have known and to explore the Christ they will discover.
In that pilgrimage of encounter they travel as sacraments of the global Christ.

Tonight we receive Christ's bread, hearing the words, "The body of Christ, the body of Christ, the body of Christ."

Receive in that bread Christ's solidarity with you.
 Receive in that bread Christ's solidarity with the world.
 Receive in that bread Christ re-forming you as a member of the Body of Christ.
 Receive in that bread Christ's longing that you and all in the Body live and serve as sacraments of Christ in the world.

As we hear the Eucharistic words of Jesus, we also hear his missional words,
 and the two interpret and elaborate each other —
 it is the body that sends, and the sending shares the body,
 and brings into being new communities that celebrate the body
 and send forth again that the body may be further shared:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
 And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

^{*} Phoebe Griswold, Address to Episcopal Relief and Development Luncheon, 2000 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, 7 July 2000.