

EVERYONE EVERYWHERE: A VISION FOR MISSION

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Sub-Dean and Professor of Mission and World Christianity at the General Theological Seminary,
at the Final Eucharist of the Everyone Everywhere World Mission Conference
of the Episcopal Church,

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Lessons: For the Mission of the Church: Isa. 49:4-13; Eph. 3:1-12; Matthew 28:16-20

Everyone Everywhere – what an extraordinary slogan! –

for it sums up in just two words so much of the vision of God,
so much of the saga of salvation shared with us in the scriptures:
God created the universe and the human community as a graced environment for
everyone everywhere.

To Noah through the rainbow God promised patient mercy to everyone everywhere.

To Abraham God promised that the people to issue forth from him would be a blessing to
all the peoples of the earth – everyone everywhere.

The mighty acts through which God delivered the Hebrews from oppression preserved
them so that they might be a sign to everyone everywhere.

To the people of Israel, God said through the prophet Isaiah in this morning's lesson,

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;

"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of
the earth" – meaning everyone everywhere.

In Christ Jesus the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,

and "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become
children of God" – meaning everyone everywhere.

Jesus preached the kingdom of God, the inbreaking reign of God on earth, reaching and
enlightening everyone everywhere –

and at this conference we've heard about it reaching Gandhi and Dalits in India,
reaching the thousand millions of China and bearing fruit in explosive church
growth,

reaching Muslim societies through Mazhare Mabloui and a variety of mission
initiatives,

reaching and empowering the persecuted and war-ridden people of Sudan,
the oppressed people of Myanmar,
the poverty-stricken people of the Caribbean.

Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons and prophesied against injustice and oppression as
signs of God's liberating justice for everyone everywhere –

and at this conference we've heard about such liberating justice through the
Millennium Development Goals,

in the struggle against the exploitation of women and girls,

in sustainability in health care and agricultural outreach –

all of this containing the seeds of the kingdom for everyone everywhere.

What a remarkable fulfillment all this is of Jesus' commission to his disciples in today's gospel! –

"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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

During this conference we've struggled with the perennial questions and arguments about how to carry out that commission:

the tension between word and deed,
between evangelization and development,
the tension between being and doing,
between cultural expression and cultural imposition,
between gospel freedom and the prerogatives of empire,
the tension between sending and hosting, giving and receiving.

Yet amid the questions and the dilemmas, there is among us a mystic intuition that we are drawn by God into a wonderful and sacred mystery,

a mystery in which the working of God in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit

is a patient, humble working that never forces its way but honors the peoples to whom it comes,

yet it comes with a confidence that it must touch every human difference with love and loveliness,

conferring liberation from the blight of every human sin, oppression and degradation.

It is in this difference-reaching impulse that Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians celebrates his call to realize how in Christ Gentiles were fellow heirs with Jews in God's covenant –

and that meant it was for everyone everywhere.

We share that mystic intuition today amid the myriad varieties of the world's people's.

Difference is the distinctive mark, for mission has to do with reaching out across boundaries.

If there's a difference, we know that the gospel must somehow reach over it because the gospel has something to say to and in every difference.

Mission is, in fact, ministry in the dimension of difference.

And so it is that today this assembly will commission seventeen missionaries to serve on the world's continents outside North America –

each missionary reaching someone somewhere,
each of them thereby a piece of the gospel reaching everyone everywhere.

Last week over breakfast at a conference in Hong Kong I experienced yet another instance of the gospel's power to reach over space, time and culture through mission witness.

"Our son always wanted to be a fashion designer," said Alice Boominathan, a teacher in a Christian college in Tiruchanapali in Tamilnadu in South India,

"He really loves clothes and interior design."

Then Alice's husband Marcus picked up the story – he's Principal of Bishop Heber College, an Anglican-founded college of the Church of South India –
 "When our son was a teenager he was asked to teach Sunday School at our church –
 "So for his teaching, he was sharing with the children the story of Ida Scudder, founder of Christian Medical College in Vellore, and he himself was so inspired that he decided he wanted to become a doctor – he worked very hard, and now he is a student at Vellore!"
 "And when he gets out," Alice put in, "he wants to go and serve the tribal people of Assam in the northeast –
 he visited there and found that they have very poor health care."

There's a grace-filled gospel arc in that story – an arc across cultures and across generations of time!

Who was Ida Scudder? – a Reformed Church of America missionary doctor, herself born to a missionary family in India, she started a hospital in Vellore in 1900 and later struggled against the skepticism of her mission board and the British colonial bureaucracy to establish the Christian Medical College that continues to be ranked among the best in all of India and south Asia.

A hundred years later a teenager in Tiruchanapali living amid the many possibilities of advancement in the high-tech booming economy of India today, *and* full of his own enthusiasm for fashion design, stumbles onto Ida Scudder's biography, and his life is changed – not to get a medical degree that will qualify him to emigrate to London, Toronto or Washington, not to rise in the medical establishment at Vellore itself, but to become a medical missionary reaching out to one of the most underserved groups within his own country.

"You will be my witnesses," said Jesus to his disciples in Luke's version of today's Great Commission gospel,

"You will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

A witness is someone who sees something and then tells the story of what she has seen – like Mary Magdalene on Easter morning – and then lives out the meaning of the story.

Ida Scudder chose her particular end of the earth, and in that place she told and lived out her particular vision of what God was up to in the world – not a work of empire, as so many Episcopalians misunderstand the historic world mission of the church, but a work of compassion; not a drive for white dominance, but a work that empowers Indians to this day, not a piece of missionary self-congratulation, but a witness that inspires an Indian teenager to embrace a counter-cultural and cross-cultural mission vocation.

In that vision transfer, the urgency to reach everyone everywhere has moved across times and cultures to become genuinely new in the biography of a teenager in India today.

Everyone Everywhere –

We can give thanks for so much that is happening in the Episcopal Church to nurture that vision and aspiration among us:

Today, as never before, congregations are engaging the task of mission discernment.

They hear God calling them to mission, and they understand intuitively that mission involves an encounter with the other, the different;

they realize they are embracing the fullness of God's call only if they are reaching out to the other and the different,

whether in their own neighborhoods or across the world.

As a result, today as never before, world mission is pursued through local initiatives in parishes and dioceses of our church.

In 1930 or even in 1960 it was rare for an Episcopal parish to have a direct link with fellow Anglicans in a parish in what we now know as the Two-Thirds World,

but today it's not uncommon for a parish to have two or three such links, many of them with multiple personal relationships that are the heart of mission companionship.

World mission is no longer a distant activity mediated only by church headquarters but genuinely an activity of the whole people of God.

The Companion Diocese Movement has been the crucial factor in nurturing this local engagement since the 1970s,

and it continues to provide coordination to parish efforts that might otherwise become diffuse and counter-productive.

Commitment to the Millennium Development Goals is engaging Episcopalians in the complicated issues of economics, development and resource sharing that are fundamental to the justice that is required for reconciliation in the broken human community.

What can happen in our church to intensify our life in the vision of Everyone Everywhere?

Deeper engagement with people of other religious faiths is one crucial step.

Now as never before our own society is a multi-religious environment,

so the encounters that long ago were unique to missionaries and other world travelers are now as close as the Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists who worship around the corner in the neighborhood.

As Paul-Gordon Chandler advised us, inter-faith *friendships* may be more to the point than the complicated negotiations that go into formal inter-religious dialogues,

and these relationships can bring maturity to the church's mission outreach in other parts of the world.

Another awareness to nurture is that the gospel is a story and stories are meant to be told.

The gospel is news, and news is designed to be announced.

Telling the story what God has done in Christ through your own story implies no particular stance toward any other story, any other news, any other religion –

and it certainly does not mean anyone is trying to convert anyone – that is the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of persons.

"You shall be my witnesses," says the risen Christ to his disciples and to us.

Letting go of our hang-ups about verbal witness and getting back to the story releases the joy of the gospel within us and frees us for proclamation.

Simply telling the story equally brings us into conversation with other stories:

it opens our ears to how God may be at work in other stories –

and there we see the paradox of how freedom in proclamation nurtures friendship, not rivalry, between evangelism and inter-religious understanding.

In all this we must highlight the ethos of companionship in mission –

the call to walk together and to share bread together with people in very different places and in very different circumstances,

forming relationships and friendships in dimensions of difference.

There have been so many testimonies to that companionship here

as people have talked about sharing pain, taking in the stories of others, listening before speaking, learning before teaching.

In companionship mission becomes a pilgrimage in discovering God.

Such companionship has always been crucial in the life of the Anglican Communion,

and its importance has a particular edge in the alienations and conflicts that afflict the communion today.

The presence of long-term residential missionaries around the world is vital to grounding this companionship for all of us.

Missionaries offer commitment over time,

and their commitment is informed by knowledge of local languages and cultures, so that they become important interpreters of local realities for the rest of us.

Companionship in mission is transforming for all participants as we come to new insights about who Jesus Christ is in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That has happened for me in so many ways around the world,

and this morning I testify to a particular disclosure about faith that came to me from African Christians in Zimbabwe when my wife Jane and I were missionaries at Bonda in the eastern highlands near the Mozambique border.

There was sad news when I returned to Bonda from a several-day meeting in the national capital of Harare:

off in the bush near Chirarwe, a village about seven miles away, a 12-year-old girl named Marita Gunda had collapsed suddenly, with no previous illness.

When she did not revive, her family rushed her to Bonda Hospital in the trailer of a borrowed tractor, but it was to no avail – Marita was dead.

This had happened two days before, and the family had taken Marita's body back to their homestead,

where yesterday she was buried at a service offered by Edward Mangwanda, the catechist of St. Gabriel's Anglican Church in Chirarwe, an outlying congregation of Bonda.

Would I be willing to go and visit them? Yes, of course – I didn't know this particular family, but they were relatives of one of the lay leaders at St. Gabriel's.

I set off driving over the dirt roads with several sisters of the Community of the Holy Transfiguration,

including Sister Alice Madzara, who struggled with a wooden leg but who always felt called to be there with the people.

The road to Chirarwe moves over rugged terrain, with few trees, so one can see over miles of mountains in all directions.

Well before the village, we branched onto a rough track that rocked us through ravines and gullies until we arrived at the Gunda *kraal*, a collection of round, thatched dwellings.

Twenty or thirty people were still there to comfort the family,

and over a fire outside several women were stirring a barrel of *sadza*, the staple corn meal porridge of southern Africa.

As we got out of the car, a tall Shona man approached us from the *kraal* and began to pull aside the poles of the gate to let us in.

Across his right shoulder was the blue sash of the Vabvuwi, the Fishermen, a men's group of lay evangelists.

Tears were streaming down his face, but as he walked he was also singing a popular song in Shona:

Maria naMarita, vakataura naIshe, 'Dai magara pano, Razaru haaifa'
which, translated, means: *Mary and Martha said to the Lord,*
"If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died."

Then the song went to a chorus: "*Nyarara Maria* [sung three times], *Razaru haaifa*"

which, translated, means: "*Be still, Mary. Be still, Mary.*
Be still, Mary. Lazarus has not died."

Woven together in the man's singing were the family's anguish, people's universal cry against God for the fact of death, and the biblical stories of Jesus wrestling with death at close quarters.

"Who is this man," I wondered, "who can so deeply grieve with the family and at the same time lift up the hope of Christ in the midst of death?"

but the man continued singing and weeping while he shook our hands, so there were no introductions.

He led us into the *kraal*, where others gathered to greet us and join in the song,

so that all were singing mightily of Bethany as we crowded into the kitchen hut — thirty people kneeling on the mud floor of a tiny space.

That song was followed by another, and then began an alternation of Shona praying, singing, and preaching led by individuals as they felt moved.

Songs of grief, songs of hope, songs of Jesus coursed like streams among the readings, prayers, and homilies,

and presiding over it all was the Fisherman with the sash, weeping, praying, encouraging the others with a homily, and, of course, singing.

After half an hour or so, the season of spontaneous worship and mutual encouragement came to an end, and I was asked to offer some summarizing prayers.

As we then sat back on the bench that rounded the interior of the hut I turned to Sister Alice next to me and whispered, “Who *is* that man who was leading us?” she turned to me in surprise and said, “That man? Didn’t you know? He is the father of Marita!”

And I was amazed — amazed that someone’s life could be so drenched with the gospel that he could sing God’s hope in the wake of his own child’s death, amazed that this bereaved father was resisting the resentment and suspicion that in his culture so often turned people to spirit mediums to find out who really caused the death,

amazed that a bereaved father could trust Jesus so intimately that he could pour out his own grief even as he nourished his family and his church on Christ’s bread of eternal life.

My own understanding of the gospel’s transforming power was transformed in that moment.

As together we all shared tea and bread in that kitchen hut, there was in the air a sweet spirit of healing,

and as the sisters and I returned home from our visit, we felt that we had been visited.

The mission pilgrimage is just that – a pilgrimage.

Pilgrims are people who journey in search of God.

As we embrace the vision of God’s vision embracing everyone everywhere

God’s embrace is widened,

and we ourselves come to new insights about who God is,

what the gospel is,

and what the Christian community can be.

Everyone everywhere –

that’s the call,

that’s the invitation,

that’s the opportunity,

that’s the mission!

Thanks be to God!