

As we continue our Lenten journey with Pope Francis and his book *The Joy of the Gospel*, let's just remind ourselves where we have been. The first week in Lent we considered the theme of joy which runs through the Bible. At how the Christian faith is filled with a deep and lasting joy. Not a surface joy, which we might call happiness, but a real God-given joy which has its roots in the faith, the trust, that God loves us now unconditionally and will never stop loving us whatever happens. Last week we looked at how we are not just called but compelled to share this joy in mission to a wider world in what Pope Francis calls *pastoral mission* which is about being open to someone else's needs, about listening to others and responding appropriately.

This week we are going to look at some of the challenges we face as individual Christians and as a Christian community when we say YES OR NO to the call to mission. Our Epistle reading from 1 Peter gives us a clear description of who and what we should be as God's people in the world. The images are drawn from the Old Testament, Isaiah and Exodus. As such they may feel a little foreign to us with their images of priestly kingdoms, holy nations and royal priesthoods. It is often hard to see ourselves here in the depths of rural Scotland fitting into these categories. The references are to the two great events in Israel's history: the Exodus and the return from Exile. So they are images of journey, of movement from a place of fear, enslavement and imprisonment, represented by Egypt and Babylon. Movement to a place of freedom, safety and life in a promised land. The word which is translated *honourably in verse 12*, has a range of meanings which includes: fine, good, noble and magnificent. In this passage Peter is urging the new Christian communities to live up to their heritage by living magnificently for the Gospel.

Pope Francis is a little more hard hitting about the challenges which face Christians and Christian communities in today's very secular world. **read extracts**

We live as Peter challenges us magnificently for the Gospel when we say yes to and embrace the call, the imperative to mission. We die as mummies in a museum when we say no to the call, the imperative to mission. When we turn inward to self preservation rather than outward with all the risks that brings.

There are some particular temptations to use a good Lenten word or challenges that effect those of us who are part of Christian communities or who would call ourselves Christian but choose to remain outside a worshipping community. We are in danger of seeing our spiritual life as something we do for our own comfort and support. When faith becomes private and personal, carefully guarded for our own benefit then faith withers and dies. There are times when we need to withdraw, times of difficulty, times of illness, times of sadness but this is not how it should be all the time. And even in these times we need and should value the prayer and support of *pastoral mission* from the Christian community. Often the community can pray for us when we simply cannot pray for ourselves.

Even if we are active and participating in the life of our Christian community it is all too easy to see *pastoral mission* as an appendage, an add-on extra, to our normal lives rather than central to it. So if we cannot envisage *pastoral mission* fitting into what we are doing day by day then we let it go by the wayside. The way to overcome this temptation is to look for God in every encounter in every day, hour, minute of our lives. Where is God in the person who so irritated me at that meeting last night? Where is God in the short tempered sales person? Where is God in homeless man or woman begging on the streets of Inverness? *Pastoral mission* can and usually is just as much about the small local picture as it is about the big global ones.

For my money though, the biggest temptation for Christian communities, for churches of all shapes and sizes, the biggest temptation is people doing a lot of activity within the Church but this is not grounded in spirituality. Too much church work is done without a sense of *pastoral mission* which grounds or permeates it. Too much activity which is spent on one of three things:

- recreating a lost glorious past, instead of living in the reality of the present
- we have always done it this way, instead of looking at what actually needs to be done now in the present
- chasing after the latest *mission* strategy, which more often than not is made of the first two temptations: recreating a lost glorious past or we have always done it this way

I can tell you from hard personal experience that these temptations are easy to fall into and they have a real hold on many churches as well as individual Christians. A *pastoral mission* which is not grounded in a joy-filled spirituality results in a lot of soul destroying activity, making us more and more frustrated, tired and eventually ends in illness.

You know I retired from NHS Chaplaincy 18 months ago and I can honestly say that the last 3 years of my working life was a perfect example of this temptation. There was a lot of activity, countless meetings, plans, strategies and *mission statements* for Chaplaincy but not one of them was grounded in a spirituality that had *pastoral mission* at its heart. The day to day work of supporting patients and staff was well grounded spiritually but not the management so beloved of the NHS. In the end I gave up because I could see that I was becoming ill, *burnout*, being the popular description. Personally, *compassion fatigue* was nearer the mark for me. As a colleague of mine said when he retired: *it just became too hard to do the right thing*.

This was my experience with NHS Chaplaincy but it is not unique it happens and is happening in church across the country to both clergy and more importantly to lay people who can no longer remember the joy of the gospel. Pope Francis wants to recall us to that joy-filled spirituality which should drive our *pastoral mission*.

So this week let us ponder:

Does our Christian community look like mummies in a museum or a joy-filled magnificent missionary congregation?