



*Holy Trinity Church, Darnall, Sheffield*

More years ago than I care to remember, when I was still living with my parents in Darnall, Sheffield, I joined in with a round of visiting organised by the Darnall Council of Churches. There were Anglicans, United Reform Church members, Wesleyan Methodists and Wesleyan Reform Methodists involved in the Council, and in the visiting. The purpose of the visit was to find out if there were any unrecognised local needs that the churches could help to meet. As in today's Gospel reading, we were sent out in twos. I was paired up with Mrs Hoadley, the URC minister's wife, a lady I knew quite well, and with whom I got along very pleasantly.



*A terraced street in Darnall*

This was in the days before much of the smaller terraced housing was demolished in Darnall, and when the houses were grouped four to a yard – one called invariably at the back doors as the front doors were almost never opened, and, unless you were invited in, you could cover quite a lot of households fairly quickly, so dense was the housing – very unlike trudging up endless drives in leafy Darley Abbey or Allestree. I can't remember exactly what time of year it was, but it was in the evening, and it began to get dark as we went round, which was quite a problem later on in the evening, going up an unlit passage into a gloomy yard and trying to locate a door knocker or, occasionally, a bell push. Apart from one household, where the lady told us she was a Jehovah's Witness and that her husband was a Roman Catholic, I remember none of the responses Mrs Hoadley and I met with that evening, but some of the other visitors did discover issues. As a result my mother met Mrs Nelson, a jolly, elderly lady with a terminally sick husband and a sprawling Darnall family, who she visited regularly thereafter for several years. I occasionally went with Mother on these visits (usually at the end of a shopping trip in Darnall) and got to know much more about everyday life in old Darnall than I had imagined before.



I mention this visiting programme as it is the closest thing I have ever done to the sort of evangelistic campaign that some churches carry out regularly, and which clearly have sanction from the example of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel reading today. I always find invitations to undertake explicit 'mission' disturbing, and feel uncomfortable at the very thought. Part of me thinks that if my faith is really so important to me I should want to take every opportunity to spread it to others. I am not one of those people who thinks religion should be kept private and never be noised abroad, so I can't hide behind that excuse. In the end I always come back to the position that it is God himself who draws people to love him and that is our task, as followers of his Son, Jesus, to facilitate that drawing by helping people to become exposed to God. We do that in the Church today primarily by being accessible, and I think it is a special duty laid on the Church of England, as the established church here, to be present and available to all who need to find God. We have often observed that it is at times of change and dislocation in life that people are most often looking for something in their lives beyond the common routine.



This is why baptisms, weddings and funerals in a church context, need to be offered as generously as possible as it is just at such times of life, birth, marriage and death, that people ask the most profound questions about the meaning of life and the purpose of their lives. I well remember a young father speaking to me after he had come to Evensong at S. Matthew's some years ago to talk to the Vicar about the baptism of his child, and saying that the birth of the child had completely turned upside down his view of the world, and what was important in it. I don't think I ever saw the man again, but I was very pleased to have had the chance to say something to him then about the love of God for him and his child.



It is not, however, something we can leave to the Vicar, because these issues, crises, turning points, call them what you will, crop up at all sorts of times in people's lives, and they don't always know where to turn for answers, and would probably never think that the church might have anything to offer them.



That is why we as Christians ought always to be ready to engage with others, especially in their times of need, because, by offering practical help, a listening ear, a word of encouragement, we offer also the love of God. You know the remark attributed to S. Francis, 'Preach the gospel everywhere, using words if necessary'. You probably also know that it can be used as an excuse for saying nothing explicit about faith! But S. Paul, writing to the Galatians in today's epistle, encourages the faithful there, and us today, to work for the good of all, and that is something that we can all do, in our own spheres, even if they are limited in scope.

Clive Lemmon