



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY MORNING
TRINITY 3
28 JUNE 2020

Matthew 10:40-end

For this and the past two Sundays the Gospel readings have been taking us through the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, covering the sending out of the twelve apostles to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'. This 'sending out' is also recorded in the Gospels according to Mark and Luke, though, in their accounts the target audience is not specified. Matthew's Gospel concludes (28:19-end) with the 'Great Commission', in which the remaining eleven disciples are sent out by Jesus with the words, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." The theme of these Matthean commissions always makes me feel a bit queasy if I try to apply them to my own life as they smack rather too much of overt evangelism for my taste. I suppose I have been too much seduced by the 'Christendom' model of the church. This idea is based on the concept of a land which was Christianized centuries ago, where the church is established, and present everywhere ('in every community' as the Church of England strapline encourages us to believe) and, where the primary duty of the body of believers in every place is to make that presence as vibrant and welcoming and useful as possible, so that the church in the community is a clear witness to Jesus and the love of God. The alternative 'missionary' model sees the world rather differently, as a sea of souls longing for something, they know not what, which must be reached by the gospel (that same testimony to Jesus and the love of God) taken to them by the local believers, sometimes by public preaching, but often by work in the community of a directly practical nature.

I am not really sure how much the Christendom model was ever really true. At a superficial level it may have seemed to be the case in England before the industrial revolution, but when the 1851 church census revealed so very clearly that large proportions of the population in the, by then, populous industrial districts, seemed to be entirely out of contact with the church it sounded a warning (though not, of course, in Darley Abbey, under the direction of the Evanses!).

This past week BBC Radio 4 began a series of programmes under the title *Rethink*, in which a whole range of national institutions and the ways we organise society are being scrutinised to see how they might be changed or improved in the light of the Covid-19 experience. I have remarked before how the pandemic has revealed strains and weaknesses in all sorts of places in our national and international life, and how this most awful time could be used as a turning point for charting a new direction for our world. I come to think that the ricketiness of our systems is much more profound than I had thought. One early example that I heard discussed in some detail was the court system. I knew already that there was a growing backlog of cases to be tried, and that the reductions in Legal Aid provision deprived all but the wealthiest of access to justice, except in the most serious of cases, but I have never been involved in the court system, and don't really expect to be, so that has not been a direct concern of mine. On the other hand, care for the elderly is something that has concerned me more directly, not yet for myself, though that time will, no doubt, come, but for those I have cared about, and I know that, whilst there are many cases of good practice, and many examples of self-giving love, yet the current system is not properly funded and is simply not adequate to the need.

I don't suppose that Radio 4 will cover the Church in its *Rethink* series (*but see footnote below*), but all who are members of the Church have an opportunity (not to say duty) to consider how we might prepare ourselves to be most effective in the post-Covid-19 world. Back in 1986 the S. Matthew's PCC adopted the objective of 'being the church for the whole parish' (or words to that effect). That was a classic statement in the Christendom tradition, and one which I would still like to affirm, but we need to work out what that means, in practical terms, for our current situation. In today's Gospel reading the focus is on those to whom the twelve are sent, and their response. If we, like the apostles, approach our neighbours and those to whom we are sent in a genuine spirit of love and concern, and we are welcomed in that spirit, then the people who welcome us will be blessed. In that way the Kingdom of God is built up.

Clive Lemmon

Footnote

I had barely finished writing the above notes when I heard the first in a special new *Rethink* series of the BBC Radio 4 programme *The Long View* focussed on the effect of sixteenth century epidemics on the future of the church in England!

The first came in 1551, during the reign of the protestant Edward VI, just when a particularly Calvinist regime for the Church of England was being set up. Known as 'The Sweat' it was very frightening as, if you developed the feverish symptoms in the morning, you could expect to be dead before evening, without any chance of putting your affairs in order, or making your peace with God. It is not known how many died in the epidemic, but it caused a religious revival in both the Protestant and Catholic camps, both blaming the sinfulness of the other for causing the plague to come upon the nation, and prompting people to almsgiving in support of the poor as a sign of repentance. Contemporary writers noted that this new found piety and generosity did not outlast the plague; when the disease died out, people returned very quickly to their old, venal ways!

The second came in 1558, and that was clearly a strain of influenza, which left 20% of the population of England dead, a shocking figure for one relatively short-lived outbreak. This was during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary, who was working flat-out to undo the protestant reforms of her predecessors and had re-established the church in England as part of the Roman Catholic Church. Apart from the usual calls to repentance and blaming the other side for national apostasy, this epidemic was, like Covid-19 today, quite age-specific in terms of mortality. It also targeted the older generation, which, in sixteenth century terms meant the people in what we would call middle age, so it almost wiped out the gentefolk class, the men of whom were in positions of authority (magistrates, parish priests etc.), throughout the country, many of whom were the 'old guard' pre-reformation Catholic families, newly restored under Mary to positions of power. It killed the (Catholic) Archbishop of Canterbury, Reginald Pole within 24 hours of the death (from stomach cancer) of the Queen herself. The epidemic gave the incoming Queen, the protestant Elizabeth, a much freer hand in cementing the protestant reformation in England. In the General Election of 1559 it was noticeable that the vast majority of those elected were of the protestant persuasion, making the ensuing reforms much easier to introduce.

It is dangerous to draw easy parallels from past events, but two seemingly contradictory things are worth noting for our time:

It is very easy for people to go back to what they knew before, especially if the previous arrangements particularly suited the decision makers and influencers.

An epidemic can be an agent for change if enough people want it to be.

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