

## ***What do we mean by mission?***

Trinity College Chapel  
Sunday of 2<sup>nd</sup> week  
Hilary Term 2007

1. It is one of the remarkable paradoxes of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that the word mission can be used, and is used, without arousing suspicion or causing surprise in almost any context, with one major exception. Large corporations and charitable institutions have their missions and will habitually inform us about them on their websites or in their prospectuses, schools and alas universities formulate mission statements to clarify what they do or intend to do; indeed this has by now become part of what is expected of them as 'good practice'. Our popular culture provides us with a plethora of heroes, policemen, doctors, secret agents, and adventurers, who embark on this mission or that trying to conquer an illness or an enemy, avenge a murder, discover some new world or some old treasure.

To frame and construct what we do as our 'mission', then, appears to be widely accepted and practiced. It adorns our jobs and activities with a notion of commitment towards a goal, indicating that, to us, our work is not merely dull and uninspiring drudgery and toil, but part of a greater, meaningful scheme and therefore relevant. The contemporary world, it seems, likes to perceive of itself as being full of missionaries eager and zealous to fulfil the tasks they have been charged with.

2. The exception, of course, is religion. The mere mention of the word 'mission' in that connection will still raise eyebrows with many. Our world, it seems, finds it natural to be populated by political and economic, academic and charitable missionaries; the only missionaries it feels uneasy about are the ones that have originally given the name to such activity, commitment and, occasionally, zeal. For

the irony of our current situation clearly lies in the fact that the religious practice of missionising is origin and prototype of all those smaller and larger missions that are going on around us all the time. So why is it that this kind of mission has fallen from favour while its secular descendants seem to enjoy such excellent health?

3. There surely is more than one reason; a full explanation would have to discuss what one American observer has aptly described as the European reluctance to include in their idea of toleration the toleration of traditional religion. Yet there are other reasons to consider, and one of them may well be that in Christianity we have allowed the meaning of mission to become intolerably narrowed down. Christian mission is not simply to be identified, as we often pretend or imply, with preaching to those of other faiths in the hope of converting them. Christian mission must mean primarily, as indeed it does with its secular derivatives, a particular quality of one's life and work. It means understanding what we do and what we say as expressions of the fact that we are sent into this world and within it entrusted with a particular, a specific task. For Christians faith can never be a purely spiritual thing, however important spirituality may be. Faith is a life-transforming power directing thoughts and deeds towards one goal. Faith thus puts Christians on a mission, and in this sense it can and must be said that mission is the very heart of the Christian life. It is an immediate consequence of faith, which without it would be dead.

This mission gives meaning and relevance to words and actions as it integrates them into a larger scheme. At the same time, it puts those who see themselves as part of that mission under an obligation. As St Paul put it: 'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.' Once again, this is not so different from the secular kinds of mission about which we hear so much all the time. To be on a mission is to be sent

by someone, to whom one is answerable, responsible. And a temptation, again with all kinds of mission, is to forget or to ignore this aspect which is always hurtful to one's sense of self-importance. One would prefer to do one's own task, not act on someone else's behalf. The difference, of course, is that while the policeman, the doctor, the ambassador or indeed the secret agent forgetting about their responsibilities are usually brought back into reality rather sooner than later and with an unpleasant jerk, it is often much more difficult, for oneself and for others, to see through and to correct a similar distortion of the Christian mission, in other words the substitution of one's own agenda for that with which one has been entrusted. And yet, without pointing the finger at this or that specific development or person, it would seem difficult to deny that all too often the claim to act on behalf of God, to follow a Christian mission has only been made, and is only being made, to embellish a perfectly secular, political or economic agenda.

4. Is there, then, any possibility of discernment? Can we know whether a particular mission, my own or someone else's, is Christian or whether it merely uses religious terminology and concepts as a disguise, to make itself sound more impressive? The answer must look at the motives underlying the respective agenda and the goals it seeks to attain. Do I act out of ambition or to secure my own advantage? Do I aim to disgrace or humiliate someone else? Is the deepest root of my action hatred or contempt? Or is it love of the neighbour and the will to do him good whatever the means to that end, in any given case, would be? Mostly it will be difficult to say, with the fullest confidence, that it is the latter, but there are certainly cases where it very clearly is the former.

5. In this sense mission is coextensive with the Christian life, which as a whole is ultimately embraced by this awareness of being sent by Jesus. Within this framework, then, mission in the more customary, narrower sense of the word, has its proper right and place. To speak of the experience which has changed their own lives, to share the good news in the hope that others will over time make the same or a similar experience is something that Christians have always found inevitable. Doing this, however, we should mind that any missionary preaching cannot be detached from that mission which is constituted by our lives as a whole. In the end the greatest missionary rhetoric that does not grow out of a life embodying the same principles, will be built on sand and, rightly, fail to convince. At the same time, the example of a life based on the principle of charity may ultimately be the most convincing missionary argument there is to be had.