

Preached by the Revd Dr Sabina Alkire, Chaplain Associate, on Sunday 7 February 2010 in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

‘What keeps the flame of faith alive in the West?’ In the past few weeks I’ve listened as this question was put to some of you, as well as to the contemplative nuns, Dominicans, Carmelites, Jesuits and Anglicans; young and old; mothers and monks; people who were spiritual not religious, and ordained administrators of the established church. The Buddhist monk’s question was genuine; the curiosity real: what keeps the flame of faith alive? How would you advise other societies to open to our technology and trade without losing their spiritual depth?

The response? Usually, actually always, an awkward pause. The kind of pause that occurs when someone walks up to you after formal hall and asks how you made such a luscious pudding. The issue is not that you did not make the pudding (although you didn’t); what puzzles is that the pudding could be called luscious at all. With such a flawed question how does one frame a response?

‘What keeps the flame of faith alive in Britain?’ Again and again people explained, politely and then more forcefully, how the question was mistaken. British society was not going in the right direction. They gave dozens and dozens of examples of ways we are less fulfilled, less caring and less profound. Church has flickered out of fashion; we have painfully few vocations to the religious life; and spiritual teachings only skim the surface. Although material pleasures are in fashion, the credit crunch destabilized our faith in the economy. And when some receive millions in bonuses whilst other diligent workers genuinely struggle to get by, the feeling is nothing short of scandal. People tried to explain in so many different ways that society and too often the church, has set its heart on the wrong things, and people find it very hard to flourish. Now as the current *Economist* argues, there is a national tendency to exaggerate gloomy negatives. Yet people’s hesitancy to claim success and issue advice seemed too tangible to be wholly wrong.

Listening to people’s reflections in over a dozen meetings, two things struck. One was the fact that people explained the weak heartbeat of faith by pointing to particular problems in our social, economic, entertainment, and political institutions. We cannot fully separate our inner spiritual life from the outer realities.

The second was the strength of people’s wistfulness for a world which did better at nurturing the spiritual. It was surprisingly strong.

Yet if a few dozen, or hundred, or God-willing a few thousand people are discouraged in the same way, it could be a beautiful beginning. There is a cartoon that shows the earth, from space – as it were from God’s view. And many voices are praying to God in despair, asking: ‘what can one person do?’ ‘what can one person do?’ ‘what can one church do?’ ‘what can one family do?’ The silent suggestion is evident: if people who care but feel too small to bring about change– if

these many little callout boxes of prayer were to join together, they would realize their strength. And this, in essence, is one of the spiritual touch-stones of community organising.

This morning opens Crunch Time: Money, Politics & Christian Faith (crunchtime2010.com). It is a week of activities in Oxford promoting spiritual renewal through community organising, and spearheaded by Magdalen's Fellows' Chaplain, Angus Ritchie. Activities include an informative evening on community-organising at St Aldates, a meditative evening on how to align our actions with our views 'cause 'if we don't act, we don't believe', a meeting where Muslim Jewish and Christian leaders share stories of working together, and conversations with students priests and political leaders who have engaged, and opportunities to do so yourself. These events and others like it across the University are taking the place of a single 'Mission'.

The interesting thing about this approach to mission is that, like our recent conversations, it holds together two parts: God's reach into ourselves and others, and God's reach through ourselves and others, into the wider society. The scripture stories show these in seamless connection. In the passage from Isaiah often referred to as 'the call', the prophet sees the living God on a throne, attended by the Bible's only mention of six-winged seraphs. The vision leaves him awestruck, keenly aware of himself and of God's living power: "Woe is me! I am lost..; yet my eyes have seen the...Lord of hosts!"

Thomas Merton describes how it feels when we accept God's reach into ourselves as follows:

'When I consent to the will and the mercy of God as it comes to me in the events of life...I find myself in the presence of hidden majesty...this is a majesty we do not *see* with our eyes and it is all within ourselves. It is the mission of the Word and the Spirit, from the Father, in the depths of our own being. ...Our inner self awakens, with a momentary flash, in the instant of recognition when we say "Yes!" to the indwelling Divine Persons.

That yes is also a beginning. The seraph touches the prophet's lips to cleanse past mishaps; then the Lord calls, "Whom shall I send?" Swift the reply: "send me!"

In the gospel story, Jesus is on a shore with crowds. Those at the back are pushing forward, and the situation was becoming precarious. Jesus slips into a boat to teach without the danger of a dip. Simon had come in from a long night at sea, and was preparing his nets so he could rest, when the Teacher settled into his boat. Tired but obliging, Simon rowed out. It may be he snoozed. He was tired, and had caught no fish last night. When he finished speaking, Jesus sits down. Instead of thanking Simon, he suggests casting the nets. It is as if you could not finish your essay and at last orders a passing football coach suggested you open another book and read just one more paragraph. The coach sought to be helpful, but his competence lay elsewhere. It had all been tried before. Yet with a grain of respect, Simon said, 'if you say so, I will let down

the nets'. Expectations were not magnificently high. But that one last paragraph made the essay; the one last cast filled the nets. Like Isaiah, Simon recoiled with awe and a shocked awareness of divine purity and power. The Lord's response was not to chide but to call. 'I will make you fishers of men'.

When we think of mission, often we focus upon the first aspect of call – that necessary asset of the soul to the indwelling Christ in the depth of our being. Yet the second part, that of God's reaching through us, is equally integral. Our expectations may not be magnificently high; we may be filled more with wistfulness than with confidence. But our actions are no less necessary than our assent.

In *Crunchtime 2010*, mission links with community organising, faith with politics, precisely because we cannot keep the flame of faith alive and vibrant unless we also tend the institutions around it with the same passion and wisdom, and because at least some must be called to do so.

The key idea of community organising is that it creates space for people to identify clearly and confront effectively things that are awry in our outer world. In church, in temple, in mosque, people have the sacred space to think through their values and seek out wisdom. People do this reflection alone, and in discussion. Next, they reach out. They find others who have identified a similar priority, analyse the problem, and plan concrete, strategic ways to work together for change. Those they work with may be from any faith or none, yet each person knows that the others also act out of deeply held values. This personal authenticity creates a kind of respect and energy. Obviously community organising is but one place from which people engage the social and political institutions that support or deform our faith; political leadership is another; leadership in churches, universities, businesses, schools, and charities do also. The process of community organising in a sense 'slows down' and makes visible the channels by which we allow God to reach through us to affect wider institutions. Obviously self-criticism is also required – little is more damaging or dreadfully effective than organised arrogance. But when well done community organising spells out how we can move thoughtfully from our deepest values to concrete and mundane changes such as living wages, or more jobs. It may even mean casting our net exactly the same way one last time.

What keeps the flame of faith alive in Britain? In a sense the monk's question is redundant. As the river said to the seeker, 'Does one really have to fret about enlightenment? No matter which way I turn, I'm homeward bound.'¹ Our relationship with the living God cannot be snuffed out – even through total neglect. But in another sense, the real energy of the question comes not from the answer but the asking, and the asking together, and the acting together as the people of the living God, who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

¹ *The Heart of the Enlightened*. Anthony de Mello.