

*Between the words that are spoken and the words that are heard may the spirit of God be present.
Amen*

Matthew 10: 1-24

First of all, let me say it is a great joy to be here this evening. This is the first year in twenty that I have not been involved in the intense business of welcoming in a fresh academic year and a cohort of new students into the life of an Oxbridge College – albeit one to the East in a University of a paler shade of blue. All that changed in January when I stepped down as Dean of St John’s College, Cambridge and became a sort of post-modern missionary - as the General Secretary of USPG – the United Society Partners in the Gospel¹ – wrestling with what global mission might look or sound or smell like in the twenty-first century.

Curiously there are quite a number of parallels with the Oxbridge context: Both Universities and mission agencies are at the forefront of issues around globalization and decolonization; both have to live with and live out of their history, engaging critically but also being faithful to key elements; both have to attend to challenges that are frequently raised about power and privilege - and whether as institutions they perpetuate inequalities of the world or change and ameliorate the deep patterns of economic and political power. In the case of Christian mission in the British context that is of course tied up with an Empire upon which, it has been said, ‘the sun never sets, but the blood never dries’.²

So, let me turn to this evening’s readings, and especially to Matthew and the account of the mission of the Twelve. This mission described here has a restricted remit, bringing the good news of the Kingdom, ‘to the lost sheep of the House of Israel’. There are several key threads that could be drawn out - but I want to focus on the idea of reception and receptivity: Entering into a different space, being received is a complex process which, of course as a College community you know well – whether you are a long-term resident or have just arrived to this extraordinary place.

As Matthew relates, the disciples can *only* engage in mission where they are received, where they are welcomed, in short where God is *already* in action. And that warm reception, that hospitality, speaks of a mutuality; of an encounter that changes both the guest and the host. To enter into the house or room of another, is to begin to trespass on the their soul, to touch upon who they are; similarly, to receive another is to open, vulnerable to being changed. It is simply not the case that people are sent by God and passive others are converted.

And indeed, it is very striking to note that in many of Jesus’s encounters – say with the Syro-Phoenician woman or the Roman Centurion, we find that Jesus himself seems surprised, he ‘ marvels’ at the faith of others; that is, he was affected, he was changed. How much more then for his disciples as they enter upon the lives of others – or indeed us.

Stretching out in compassion to others – making space for the Other in our midst requires accommodation and births transformation. It speaks to the depths of what it means to be a human being: For we become who we are through the Other; Indeed it is *only* through encounter with difference made manifest in another that we discover our nature, our gifts, our distinctive story, our trajectory through life, our vocation – discover that we are ‘beloved of the earth’. This is the gift of genuine encounters with others – teachers and friends; lovers or strangers.

And indeed that profound Christian insight is embedded deeply in the very structures of this place – where it is understood that learning takes place in the context of the personal encounter, within friendship and fellowship; in tutorials, but also at the common table in the bar, on a punt.

¹ The oldest Anglican mission agency, founded in 1701 as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

² Ernest Charles Jones, the English Chartist leader, 1851.

Because it is only through this rich entanglement with others that we have the possibility, as D.H. Lawrence put it to escape 'the glass bottles of our own ego';³ to discover our 'True Self'; to reject the beguiling and deceptive idea that we are in control of our desires, that we are fully autonomous and independent. On the contrary, the understanding, that we are profoundly interdependent and relational – transports us, into a new and more generous experience of ourselves.

But in the gospel account there is a precondition for that deep mutual encounter: – no gold, no silver, no bag, no sandals, no staff. A hallmark of genuine Christian mission is we don't bring *our* stuff, *our* baggage with us; that is our fall-back securities, our comfort blankets of wealth or status, the school we went to, the family we come from, our personal achievements, all of those things that we believe will anchor our sense of worth or well-being.

As I have travelled to different parts of the world in the last few months – a deeply humbling experience - I have been reminded of the ways in which many European missionaries brought their baggage with them, saw themselves as participating in an activity called 'civilising', an activity with multiple impacts, one dimension of which we might talk about in terms of the language of 'internal colonization' or 'the colonization of the mind'.

But equally, this was not universal: There were those missionaries, severe critics of the imperial project, who cast such ideas aside and who entered deeply into the house of culture, were warmly received and whose memory is still held in high regard. People like the SPG missionary Arthur Cripps who lived and worked in Mashonaland in Northern Zimbabwe, a teacher, poet and fierce satirist. His play of 1902, *The Black Christ*, even goes so far as to present British Imperialism as an Antichrist figure in a nightmarish vision of the Last Judgment:

*'I see a hooded fiend in judgment set
Red, white and blue the flappings of His hood,*

*...Its cruel, thin, thirsty lips they sponge with blood
About its loins a flag of Empire..'*

Unsurprisingly the 'wolves' of the empire, were, to put it mildly, not impressed with Cripps.

Not impressed, as Governments around the world are not impressed when those who enter deeply into the experience of others speak up and speak out or form within churches communities of resistance and hope as happens today, for example in Duterte's Philippines.⁴

To seek to put aside the baggage and noisy clutter of our selves and reach out confident in God's grace alone - to *really* listen and care for and encounter another person, even in a simple fresher conversation or indeed in a cross-cultural encounter like the experience of working abroad for a time in the worldwide church - deepens and transforms who we are – and it can even equip us to be bold, for God's Kingdom of justice and peace, against the howling of the wolves. Amen

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³ From the poem, *Escape*.

⁴<https://player.vimeo.com/video/286746068>
<http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2017/05/uspg-stands-with-philippines-church-following-illegal-arrest-of-bishop.aspx>