

Monday 22 September 2003 at 9.30 am
NEAC – Getting it across - Mission
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The Lord Jesus said to his disciples, ‘You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ There is a desperate need that we today take upon ourselves, because it has been given to us by Christ, the responsibility to be witnesses, not just to this nation, although we begin here, but also to the world. There is a desperate need too for that power of which the Lord Jesus spoke.

I suppose every generation speaks of a crisis, but it is perhaps more true of ours than most. There is a crisis in mission as people drift further and further away from church and further and further and further away from Christ. I think of a student. She was in despair. Her life was in turmoil. She felt a spiritual emptiness, deep within. She sensed somehow that God might be able to do something to help her, but she didn’t know where to find him. Then one day she went to the supermarket. It was a Sunday. She saw crowds of young people going into a church and she began to wonder whether her spiritual longing could be answered or satisfied within that building. But she stayed outside, she had never been in a church, and she thought ‘I would never fit in. I would feel strange, not knowing when to stand up and when to sit down’ So she waited. They all went in and she went away. The next week she came back. Again, she saw many young people going in. Again she held back. It was alien territory and after they had all gone in, she went away again. I guess the surprise is that she got so close. Very few people in our country even get to the door, let alone go in. The fact is that people are not coming into our churches. If current trends continue, by 2030 church going, certainly in Anglican churches but the situation is the same across the denominations, will be down to of the current level and there will be virtually no children in church. Which is why ‘Getting the message out’, our theme today, is so vitally important. The Lord Jesus Christ said ‘go’. For perhaps too long we have been saying ‘Come’, to our activities, to our buildings, to our territory and now they are not coming. Praise God, that girl came back, four Sundays running. That was the extent of her spiritual longing. Wonderfully, an elderly saint spotted her and began to chat with her, saying ‘do you want to go in?’ She did come, and it took her three or four months before God led her to Christ. But most people will not persevere like that, they won’t come to the door, they won’t come in. If we are going to reach people we will need to go to them and we will need to be radical. That will be very costly individually, for our local churches, for our denomination.

I have got four brief ‘m’s for you:

1. Mission

It is rather like motherhood and apple pie. We all believe in mission. Every diocesan vision statement, and there are a lot of them now, every diocesan strategy document has mission right at the heart of it. But what does it actually mean? We all affirm mission. We all affirm the priority of mission. But it means so many different things to so many different people. It is time that we Evangelicals reaffirmed the priority of evangelism. Yes, we are rightly concerned for the whole person; we are rightly concerned for the whole of society; we are rightly concerned for the whole created order. Our God is and we should be too. There are many terrible problems in our

world: ecological, political, sociological, and we should do all we can, in the name of Christ, to alleviate them. But there is no doubt what the greatest problem is that faces human beings. It is a spiritual problem. It is an age old problem: human beings cut off from a holy God, facing his judgment. Once we remember eschatology, the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ will one day return and every single human being who has ever lived must stand before him and give an account as to how we have lived our lives. Once we remember coming judgment, how can we but say that the spiritual problem is the greatest one? It is in danger of cutting people off from Christ for eternity.

In that desperate situation we must reaffirm that we have a gospel to proclaim. Evangelicals are gospel people. We have always had secondary differences amongst us. We should not be surprised by that. It has always been the case for generations and always will be, but we are united around common convictions. We believe in **sin**; it's universal, it's fatal. God's holy judgment against sin means we are all by nature cut off from him. Yet we believe too in **salvation**. That God, in his infinite mercy, has come to us in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he has died to take the punishment that we deserve. Now, if we will only trust in him, we will be justified and acceptable to him. We believe in the **Spirit**. That God's Spirit has been given to enable the miracle of new birth, conversion, without which no-one can be right with God. It is those convictions about sin, salvation and the Spirit that led our forebears, at great cost to themselves, to go to the length and breadth of this nation quietly, unknown, unheard of, to live out the gospel and proclaim the gospel. They are what led them to go to the ends of the earth. And we today have that huge privilege, that huge responsibility to do the same and take the gospel to the ends of the earth, to our nation, to the villages, to the inner cities, to the suburban areas, to the whole nation.

Too often we are stuck in the old patterns, aren't we? We think in terms of buildings. Praise God for our buildings. They can be very useful in mission, but if we are stuck in the buildings, we find that people will not come. Or perhaps we are stuck with our old parochial system, again a great resource for mission. Praise God for it. It says we have a presence everywhere. It says we are committed to the whole nation. Long may it last, but there are limitations. The parochial system assumes that people basically function in localities. So it is no surprise that we are most effective in parish ministry with those who live neighbourhood lives: the elderly, children, parents at home with their children. But what about those who live not so much in neighbourhoods, but in networks, groups that are bound together by shared employment, shared ethnicity, shared interests? A very different approach will be needed for them. We Evangelicals need to lead the way in thinking up imaginative ways of reaching people who will not be reached by the old systems. It was wonderfully encouraging on Saturday night, wasn't it, to hear of some of the new ways of reaching our nation that are beginning to be developed. We need to be at the forefront of more of them. What about those other areas, the parts of the city or town we live in, those villages nearby, where no-one is hearing the gospel of Christ because no-one is proclaiming it. Perhaps the local vicar doesn't believe it, or at least never preaches it. Surely we should be rightly concerned for those places too.

I long, I guess like all of us, that we Evangelicals should be not so much united in what we oppose, although we need to do that, but in what we affirm, the gospel, and in a passionate longing to get it out. How wonderful it would be, if in local areas, we get together, not just with our fellow Anglican Evangelicals, but with Free Church

Evangelicals too and ask the question: what are the areas, what are the groups, what are the networks that are largely unreached with the gospel? How can we think imaginatively and get out and do something about it? Evangelical churches with radical ideas are, to be honest, a nuisance. Anyone who comes up with a new idea, a new way of doing something, breaks the mould. Some bishops won't like it. Some deanery pastoral committees won't like, but we need to reaffirm the primacy of the local church in outreach and evangelism. It is very easy, isn't it, when we see a church down the road doing something a little different, rocking the boat a little bit, to join the chorus of disapproval rather than standing with them and saying, 'Good on them. They are thinking of doing something different'. Better still, let's dream dreams together and together go to the pastoral committee and to the bishop and say, 'Here is an idea for reaching that whole area of our community that at the moment seems to be dying, that seems to have no living church there. This is what we would love to do. Will you let us?' We need to pray that permission will be granted and sometimes, when it is not, we need to go ahead anyway, backing perhaps a Free Church project. Denominations don't matter. You ask anyone under 40, denominations are not their mindset anymore. It is Christ we are concerned for, not any one denomination, although I passionately believe the Church of England is still going to be greatly used in reaching the nation for Christ. It is not the only way. Of course it is not. Let's have a united strategy in mission and evangelism right at the heart of our priorities.

2. Morality

I hope there is a corporate groan as I mention that word and perhaps we think, 'Couldn't we leave morality and those debates until our session on homosexuality this evening and just focus on mission this morning?', but, of course, the two are integrally related. We know some of the debates and divisions within the Anglican denomination gravely affect our mission today and much more so in places where there are dominant Muslim populations. Their mission is made very difficult by many within our Anglican Communion, certainly within North America and, sadly, to some extent within Britain. We have had a wake up call recently, haven't we? It used to be easy to say, 'Oh, it couldn't happen here or at least not for a long time'. Then we had Reading and then we had bishops openly saying that they were in support of same-sex unions. Others argued purely pragmatically, or on ecclesiological grounds. Yet we believe that even if the church was to change its mind, the Bible won't change its mind. God won't change his mind and we are right to demand a clear theological lead from our Archbishop and our bishops, not just a political lead. The withdrawal of Jeffrey John gives us some degree of time, but here is my fear: we will go back to where we were before. The situation will become very slippery. There will be no one clear moment when we all come out of the trenches together and that gives great possibilities to do what we were doing before, just dividing. Some will keep saying, 'Oh, not now. Now is not the moment.' 'Not now, not now, not now "gradually" becomes "never" and we lose any kind of nerve. Others will say, 'We have got to move forward and make a very clear stand.' Perhaps they imply that unless others take exactly that stand they are not being faithful to Christ, and then the result is Evangelical division and just a few make the stand and they end up marginalised in some little 'Church of England continuing' grouping that no-one notices and which doesn't reach the nation. There is a desperate need, for the sake of mission and evangelism for us to stand firmly together on morality, to agree unitedly on the principle that God's will is made clear in the Bible, and it won't change and we will not budge. We are mainstream Anglicans, right at the centre, standing with brothers

and sisters throughout the world and we are going to stand firm. We may well differ, we are bounded to, aren't we, on policy, but let's still stand together for the sake of the gospel. So we might not actually agree with what that church down the road did. We might think that we do not need to take the same step. But if they took it for the sake of the gospel and in the name of Christ and in a concern for his name, let's back them and stand with them and insist that they are authentic Anglicans, that they must be allowed proper, orthodox oversight, that they must not be pushed in to some ecclesiological backwater and let's stand with our brothers and sisters in North America too, for the sake of mission, otherwise we will begin to fragment and will not have an impact on our nation.

3. Ministry

We are all ministers, full-time ministers, of the gospel. We need to keep encouraging one another to see ourselves in that light. This clergy/laity distinction, I am struggling to see it in the Bible. We are all full-time ministers, with different roles. But having affirmed that, let's also say that to be equipped, all of us, in mission we'll need the full-time pastors and teachers, church planters and evangelists to equip us and release us in mission, to begin to lead churches up and down the land. So there is a desperate need for the recruitment, training, and deployment of a whole new generation of gospel ministers. We must not think 'how many ministers, how many pastors, do we need to look after the church as it is'? The question is, 'how many ministers, how many church planters and evangelists do we need to reach the nation'? That will mean complete reversal of what is beginning to be the policy of downsizing, at least in terms of full-time pastor-teachers and evangelists and planters. We need many more.

Recruitment

Let's be praying that other Lord's Prayer, 'Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest field. Let's be seeing that as a priority in our local churches, to be recruiting the next generation of full-time evangelists, full-time pastors, full-time church planters.

Training

It is hopeless to recruit them if the training then corrupts them and means they are ill-equipped to be gospel ministers in this new generation. Colleges are crucial. I believe most of the training is in local churches. I believe in apprenticeship schemes, but colleges are crucial if people are to be trained for a full-time, long-term ministry. You'll know that our colleges are under threat. We want to save money. If we have to fund training in other ways and not from central funds, then it is worth it. Let's not allow our Evangelical colleges to be watered down. People need clear training in evangelical ministry if they are to have the gospel convictions to last them for a lifetime in gospel ministry. That matters for mission.

Deployment

There is little time to say anything about deployment. I want to encourage us, in our local churches, to take initiatives in church planting and deploying people to do it, in growing staff teams. We need larger churches if we are to reach larger, bigger areas and then to resource smaller, struggling churches so that partnerships develop across the Evangelical world for the witness of Christ.

4. Meekness

This is a surprising way to end, perhaps, but there is just a danger, I know, and it certainly would have been even more of a danger if I had more time to go on, that we can come across as rather strident, rather arrogant, as if we have got all the answers, as if one strategy will work. That is the impression we give to others, isn't it, that we Evangelicals have the ball at our feet. We have the numbers. We have the spiritual vitality. We have the financial muscle. If only we can adopt the right strategy, we'll change the Church of England, we'll change the whole nation. Yet we need to remember the words of the Lord Jesus. He said, 'The meek will inherit the earth'. Not the strident, not the strategists, but those who humbly depend on their God.

Iain Murray, in his great biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, commented that Lloyd-Jones's basic unease with English Evangelicalism was its failure to see its need of spiritual power. What a telling comment that is. I hope that NEAC will draw us together, united in the gospel, and send us out together longing to change our churches, our denomination, our nation. There is massive potential in this building and all that we represent, but let us never forget that we have no power in ourselves. We depend on the sovereign God to work through his word, by his Spirit. We need to be praying that he will have mercy on us despite our hypocrisy, and there is lots of that, despite our fictionalism, despite our pride; to have mercy on our Church of England, despite its many failings; to have mercy on our nation. Let's not first look to our leaders, our organisations, our strategies, but to our God.