

Please send someone else – August 2016

Steve Annandales

Let us pray

Father God, I pray you will give me a pure heart that I may see you, a humble heart that I may hear you, a heart of love that I may serve you and a heart of faith that I may abide in you.

Amen

Commissioned by God

It is nearly twenty-one months since I stood here at the Remembrance Service in 2014.

I'm here reluctantly. I'd rather being sitting unnoticed at the back of church. When it was suggested I might do some more sermons, I said 'Absolutely not.' Over time several different people said 'Do more.'

Rather like Moses I said 'Please get someone else to do it!' Rather like Moses, I have wrestled and argued with God about it. Eventually a bit like Moses, I've gone with what I think God wants, rather than what I want.

The book of Exodus is the story of the birth of Israel as a nation, so that ultimately God may be revealed to the whole world. It is an epic book, dominated by Moses.

At the time of the burning bush nearly 300 years have past since the era of Joseph. The Israelites privileged position has gone. They are now slaves under a new Pharaoh. A great programme of city building is underway. The Israelites are organised into working parties, under harsh task masters, and forced to dig out mud to make bricks for the new cities.

However their population is growing, so fearing rebellion, Pharaoh orders the killing of Israelite male babies by throwing them into the River Nile. Moses' mother was resourceful. She placed him in a basket that floated. He was found by one of Pharaoh's daughters, rescued, brought up and educated in the harem.

One day, when he was grown up, he was watching the Israelites hard at work. He saw an Egyptian beating one harshly. He intervened killing the Egyptian. As a result Moses had to flee the country for many years. In an alien land he wondered was he an Egyptian by upbringing or an Israelite by birth?

Out in the desert, tending sheep, he stops, seeing a blazing bush. He turns to it and amazingly meets God. God gives him an astounding commission. Moses is to go back to Pharaoh and lead God's people to freedom.

Moses is most reluctant. He says, 'Who am I to do this? I'm not up to the job.' God says 'I will be with you.'

Moses asks 'How am I to explain who you are?' Moses thinks he will not be believed by the Israelites. He is to tell them God is the living God from whom all existence comes. Say 'I am who I am.'

Moses is still worried. 'I'm not good with words', he says. 'Please send someone else.'

God is not best pleased, but says he is sending him Aaron, who can speak well. God assures Moses he will help them both know what to say and teach them what to do.

Moses was not perfect and yet God had something vitally important for him to do. God gave him help and gave him a mission. The reluctant Moses accepts the commission and goes back to Egypt.

I've been very reluctant to stand here because I felt I had retired from being active in the church. It was time to sit in the sun, to go on cruises, and to be a passenger in the church as well on a ship.

I'm here not because of a burning bush experience. Having thought about it for some months, I just feel it actually is a fresh call by God. It is something fresh and new from God for me to do. Eventually I said to God 'Here I am Lord.'

The strange thing is that it seems to give me more joy to do what God wants, rather than keep saying ' Find someone else.'

Now Moses was given an astounding commission, mine is more smaller, to do an occasional sermon. I wonder what new or refreshed call God has in mind for you? I wonder are you as reluctant as I have been?

We need to remember what God said to Moses. He said 'I will be with you. You will not be alone. There are other people to help you.' He also said.' I will teach you what to say and what to do.'

Whether you are still getting paid to work, or are a homemaker, or a carer or are retired, God still has a unique commission for you. There is something God wants you to do that will serve God and bring you joy.

Are you ignoring God?

Are you wrestling with God?

Are you ready to accept God's particular commission for you?

Our Shared Commission

Now in addition to our unique, particular commission, there is one commission given to all of us by Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, the very last words of Jesus to his disciples are:

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of time.'

It is all too easy to simply look at this passage as an instruction to become missionaries in some far off distant land. While that is very important, and for some people, it is their unique and personal calling by God so to do, the passage is also a commission for everyone.

At the time of Jesus the concept of nations did not necessarily mean countries. It was more about cultures and people with different traditions. The commission was to take the Good News into places of different cultures. Today for us it means into the culture of secularism and consumerism. We live amongst people of no faith.

In the Greek, from which this gospel passage is translated, the meaning of the word for Go is not about going somewhere in the future. Instead it is an action that is already happening in the present.

It is more like 'As you are going about in your life, make disciples.'

'As you are going about in your life, make disciples.'

We are called to make disciples as we go about our daily lives, whatever that is and wherever we are. Today's gospel is not just a commission for the evangelists amongst us. It excludes no one. There were eleven disciples and now the mantle rests on us.

How many opportunities a day do we each have to be missionaries as we go about our ordinary lives?

Often people feel very reluctant to embrace this commission. This is a true story. A few years ago a Vicar preached on this passage and told his congregation it was their job to make disciples of their neighbours, work colleagues and friends in clubs and societies. His church was more than reluctant. A group of people signed a joint letter saying, 'Mission was his job and his alone. How could he possibly ask them to do something so embarrassing?'

I know where they are coming from. I certainly do not want to be perceived as Bible bashing. Someone once said to me 'I'm OK with you being a Christian as long as you don't preach at me.'

The tough question is how do we **all** make disciples who then want to be baptised and who then want to learn more about being a follower of Christ?

There is a basic model of being a local missionary involving four Ps. Prayer, Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion.

Prayer. Pray for those you know who have no faith. Pray for people you work with or socialise with. Pray for the members of groups and clubs to which you belong. Pray that God will be noticed in that secular space.

Presence is about coming alongside people in need. Whenever we give loving service to those in need that is part of making disciples. If we show others God's love, if God's love shines in us, they might notice. We need to remember people are far from God and patience is needed, as well as love to build trust.

I'm part of a creative writing group. It had been in existence for two years when I joined it. In the group are a couple of people keen on tarot readings and the like. Others appeared to have no faith. I felt as if I was an alien in a strange land.

One week I told them I went to All Saints. It was ignored. Another week the person who usually brought the refreshments emailed to say she was ill. So I took cake, tea and coffee from home. One said, 'Thank you, that's really Christian of you.'

Then two weeks later, when discussing our weekly homework, a subject to write about, someone, not me, said, 'Let's pick a passage from the Bible and write a story featuring it.' They all did a story.

Secular space had been invaded [PAUSE] and God became present amongst us. I was only myself and served some refreshments. God did the rest.

To which secular clubs and groups do you belong and how might you invade that secular space by loving service?

If we are to be local missionaries we also need to do practice proclamation. This does not have to mean standing on a street corner proclaiming the Good News, but it can, of course.

Proclamation is for me being able to respond to someone's questions when they ask about Christianity. We all need to be able to answer questions about our faith.

I was once at a national NHS meeting. Afterwards a woman called Sadie came up to me and said. ' I know you are a Christian. Could you stay for a ten minute coffee and tell me what you believe?'

I did stay, telling her it would take more than ten minutes. We lived 120 miles apart, so we began a two-year email conversation.

In the emails I asked her to tell me about herself, and what was prompting her to ask. She told me about her life, I listened and encouraged her. She asked me how I'd

become a Christian and I told her. Only then did we talk about the Bible.

10 years later she became a churchwarden.

Proclamation is not about being pushy. The skill in proclamation is first to listen to someone about their journey in life. It is then about being ready to share your story and then to tell Christ's story.

To whom might you listen more deeply and later share your own story and the Bible?

The fourth P is Persuasion. I am very reluctant to try to persuade someone into faith. I have a friend in the Isle of Man and he is a strong atheist. We have great conversations about our different views. We respect the differences. Logical reasoning seems to have no effect on him.

Looking back I was an atheist until I was twenty-nine. I did not have a road to Damacus moment, nor did someone sit me down and persuade me.

I was first drawn to church by wife, then a Sunday school helper. I went to church a few times. It made no sense to me whatsoever.

Then the Vicar asked me to join a Sunday evening sermon discussion group. I said I didn't believe, so what was the point. He said they needed non-believers for

debates. So I went several times. I think I listened more than I argued.

Somewhere along the line, in a time of prayer in the group, something touched me. I knew I had to explore faith more. I think God persuaded me to take a first step in a moment of Divine encounter. It was not a flash more a loving nudge.

So it is God who persuades. Our role is simply to encourage people to be open to his touch. How can we do that?

- If you take part in an activity for All Saints that brings you into contact with people of no faith, think about how you could create moments for possible Divine encounter. Does your activity have significant time for prayer, or bible readings, or music or singing and moments of quiet contemplation?
- If a friend, a work colleague or even a golfing partner is sharing their woes with you, offer to pray for them in the moment. There and then.

This is being a local missionary as a channel for God's touch.

Summary

From Exodus we discover that no matter how reluctant we feel, no matter how unsuited to the task we might feel, God has a specific calling or commission for each of us. God will send others to help us, God will teach us what to say and do. God will be with us always.

- Are we ignoring God's specific commission?
- Are we wrestling with God about it?
- Are we ready to accept God's particular commission?

From Christ's Great Commission we discover that everyone has to make disciples as we go about our normal lives.

We are missionary:

- By praying that people we know will find faith
- By coming alongside people in loving service,
- By being ready for their questions, by being prepared to listen to them and to share our journey of faith with them.
- And by seizing an opportunity for a possible prayerful divine encounter.

We need to be intentional as local missionaries.

- For whom will you pray?
- Who will you come alongside?
- To whom will you listen and share your journey?
- How might you be a channel for divine encounter?

Let us pray

Father God encourage us all to overcome our reluctance to respond to your personal call and to overcome any embarrassment we might feel about being local missionaries.

Be with us Lord as we come alongside those in need, as we invade secular places with your love and give us the courage to be channels for your Divine encounter with lost and fallen people.

Amen

Steve Annandale