

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts
on the results of the Second 8 Essential Qualities survey**

Advent Sunday 2016

The story goes that a young Canadian mission worker was telling a friend that he was always looking for guidance from God and that he'd come to be an evangelist in South America because, when he was thinking and praying about his calling, he'd suddenly seen a chocolate bar with **Brazil**-nuts in it.

'What would you have done,' asked his sceptical friend, 'if it had been a **Mars** bar?'

As you may have seen in this week's newsletter, I've been asked to address the issue of mission and evangelism during Advent – specifically in relation to our survey earlier this year for the diocesan initiative of the 8 Essential Qualities for a healthy church. In that new survey, the category of 'Need-Oriented Evangelism' replaced 'Passionate Spirituality' as our weakest of the eight factors and becomes the one we need to focus on for the coming year.

At one level mission and evangelism seem to be pretty straightforward: words that refer to proclaiming the Gospel and telling people about Jesus Christ. However, the fact that in the 8EQs programme the word 'evangelism' is often replaced with 'outreach' suggests that there's more going on here than immediately meets the eye – something that's underlined by the slightly cumbersome adjective 'need-oriented'.

So, how should we explore what all this means? My plan is to look at four simple questions over the four weeks of Advent. First, what are mission, evangelism and outreach? Second, what do the most *positive* results of our survey tell us about evangelism in this church? Third, what do the more *negative* results of our survey tell us about evangelism in St Mary's? And fourth, how should we go forward as we seek to address 'Need-Oriented Outreach'?

This morning we'll look briefly at what we mean when we use such terms as evangelism, mission and outreach. Lets go back to our simple story about that Canadian mission worker in South America. Even as we think about evangelism in that very *short* conversation, *several* questions about mission immediately pop up:

Historically, how did Christianity arrive in Canada and how did it reach South America?

Theologically, what perceptions of evangelism are in play here?

Spiritually or psychologically, what is it that's driving this person to embark upon this mission?

Those are just three questions and there could well be any number of others. And lets just stay with the historical one – on the face of things Christianity arrived in Canada and Brazil in the same way: through settlers from Europe. But we know that North and South America were settled in very different ways, and this had (and continues to have) a major impact upon how the faith is rooted in those cultures.

And the same is true in the UK, in England and in Warwick – there are significant historical dynamics in play. The presence of Christianity in Scotland and England is similar but different. Both countries have national churches in which the Queen has an influential role – but Scotland's 'state' church is Presbyterian and England's is Anglican. They have different structures and theologies and their place in the life of those nations

also arises from different histories. So how churches go about evangelism and outreach will be shaped by the past as much as the present.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s one eminent writer on mission and evangelism looked back over the history of the Christian faith and identified six distinct phases of what he called its 'missionary enterprise' during its journey of two millennia. We don't need to go into the detail of each of those periods covering what he calls: a) primitive Christianity of Jesus and early church; b) the patristic period of the Church Fathers; c) medieval Roman Catholicism; d) the Protestant Reformation; e) modern Enlightenment; and f) the emerging ecumenical period. What's vital for us is that in each of these periods a wide variety of Christians wrestled with their perception of evangelism and mission. In his view 'all of them believed and argued that their understanding of the faith and the church's mission was faithful to God's intent. This did not, however, mean that they all thought alike and came to the same conclusions' (Bosch *Transforming Mission*, p182).

In other words, Christian mission, evangelism and outreach exist in a number of different forms and have always adapted to changes in culture and society. Now, in 2016, many are asking whether we've moved into a *new* stage of human history: Are we entering what's being called a post-truth society? The experience of popular votes being won with little regard for truth in both the UK and the US raises questions about whether facts, data or evidence matter anymore; in the face of charismatic leadership and motivating a group of followers who believe that this leader thinks like they do. (Although, that in itself, is open to question!) We'll probably discover more about that in other forthcoming elections. But meanwhile, against this background of change and flux, we might ask what does evangelism mean for us in this time?

Another writer about this subject tells a story of Paganini, the great 19th century violinist, who once came onto a stage before his audience and discovered there was something wrong with his instrument. He looked at it and realised it wasn't his famous and valuable one. He felt paralyzed for a moment, then turned to his audience and told them there had been some mistake and he did not have his own violin. He stepped back behind the curtain thinking it was still where he'd left it but discovered someone had stolen his and left an old second-hand one in its place.

He thought for a moment, then came out before his audience and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen: I'll show you that the music is not in the instrument, but in the soul." And he played as he had never played before; and out of that second-hand instrument, the music poured forth until the audience was enraptured with enthusiasm and the applause almost lifted the ceiling of the building, because the musician had revealed that music wasn't in the mechanics but in his soul.

Something similar can be said about evangelism and mission. In the end, it's not about having a deep insight into history or a well-thought out and planned programme of outreach (although such things can help). Our 'mission' is to walk out on the stage of this world and reveal that the music of our faith isn't in externals or things but in the music of God's grace that's in our souls.