

Evangelism: The overflow of a grateful heart



A former colleague of mine, the late Revd Canon Marion Mort, said these words at a conference called *Making Christ Known*. I have never forgotten them:

‘Mission is one and it is God’s mission. We are invited to share in his work of reconciliation, and that reconciliation was achieved by the blood of the cross. We come therefore as Christ’s Ambassadors, delivering the message of the King in the language of those to whom we are sent. It is therefore about moving on from where we are, or even sometimes going back to the community from which we came.

It’s worth remembering the confused and angry young man who called himself Legion when Jesus asked his name. After the Bay of Pigs incident, the local farmers found him sitting at Jesus’ feet, clothed and in his right mind. When Jesus is leaving he asks to go with him but Jesus says, “No, go back to the city and tell them what God has done for you”. And the wonder is that, restored and made whole, he can go back...

Mission and evangelism flow naturally from worship, the overflowing of a grateful heart.’

There are a number of wonderful insights here. Mission and evangelism are only possible because it is God’s love in Christ which *finds us first*. The grace of God, the overflow of his love into the world, his actions of healing and reconciliation, his good news for all people are what equip us for evangelism. But what I really love is the way Marion highlights the last person we might think of as a chosen evangelist of the gospel: a young man tormented by his demons, howling in caves surrounded only by herders and their animals (Mark 5:1-17; Luke 8:26-39).

This young man meets Jesus and is healed. He is commissioned to go back and demonstrate in his own witness, in his mind and body, living proof of God’s love and mercy. He understandably wants to cling to Jesus, but accepts that rather than going on as a disciple he must go back as an evangelist. So Marion tells us that evangelism comes from ‘the overflowing of a grateful heart’. It is not about our certainty, our purity or our ‘rightness’. It is gratitude, the thankfulness and thanksgiving which flows from our Christian life and worship, which equips us to be evangelists.

Jesus crosses religious and cultural boundaries and goes out to the places where the world dumps the human rubbish it would rather forget. Yet it is there, in the place of suffering and fear, that God’s love overflows and a fantastic transformation occurs. The demons are gone; the naked, violent man is clothed and at peace. And, just as the good news was announced to simple shepherds, so it is the pig farmers who first go to the city and bring back people to see what has happened. There they meet God’s love manifested in the person they perceive as the least likely to be able to share faith or tell people about God. In the place where they abandoned and chained him, God is working.

Too often rural Christians have told me that they are not equipped to be evangelists or able to explore a vocation because they imagine God calls outgoing, energetic people burning with all the right words and certain faith. Yet in the story of Legion we see God’s love empowering the poor, the most marginalised and the least articulate. God’s love flows from rural to urban, effecting transformation. God’s love and mercy in

mountain and lake creates ripples in the metropolis, because Jesus, a Jew, goes out of his way to work among the 'unclean' places of pigs and tombs.

And what about those farmers who ran into the city to say what they had seen? We should not forget how that shook everything up. People begged Jesus to go away and leave them alone. Who can blame them? Yet without those farmers, Legion would not have been restored and sent to evangelise.

There is collateral damage – hard sacrifice, economic loss and the reality that equipping for evangelism comes out of the community as it is, using the resources that are already there. Sometimes we can be afraid of the work God is doing among us and the promptings of Jesus to sacrifice for others to tell the good news. What did Jesus say to those farmers?

Imagine the young man going back to the bustling, prosperous, Gentile-filled city, and meeting the people who remembered him being dragged away screaming to be chained up and left among the caves. What happened when they saw for themselves the person 'clothed and in his right mind' who had been given not only healing and peace, but the ability to speak about it. Imagine what they might have wanted to ask him, what he might have said to them about what God had done? Would they have looked on him in awe and wonder? Would they have embraced him like the Prodigal? Would they have driven him away in fear? Would they have given thanks to God? What might have changed because he was restored to them?

I sometimes meet people who write off small rural communities and condemn them to life among the tombs by assuming they have nothing much to contribute to mission and evangelism. But, in an echo of his announcement of the Kingdom of God in Luke 4, here Jesus demonstrates that his vocation is to transform the here and now, pointing to God working outside the 'official' urban structures run by wealth, privilege and religious elites. This story illustrates what 'release for the prisoners' really means: a prisoner in mind and body has been set free and the kingdom is more visible because of it. Just one is enough. As Marion tells us, God is at work among us and we are all called to take our love and worship and turn it into visible gratitude that inspires and changes others to seek after God.

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