

Steven Croft: The Thornleigh Lecture, 2006

Thank you for your invitation and your welcome. It's good to be with you.

My purpose this evening is to offer you some thoughts on the changing role of the evangelist in Britain in the 21st Century. I do that, as has been said, from the perspective of over 20 years of ordained ministry spent partly in parishes and partly in theological education and from my current position in which I am privileged to travel and listen and attend to what is happening across our society and across the churches.

My contention is that the role and ministry of the evangelist is changing significantly as our society changes and evolves. I want to define the nature of those changes as I see them and also to argue that the change is actually a recovery of a more complete and rounded New Testament picture of this vital ministry.

To that end, I would like to begin by quoting probably the greatest of all Christian evangelists, Paul, reflecting on the principles which shaped his ministry:

“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9.19-22).

You may know the ancient story about the pastor and the evangelist who go to stay in a log cabin together in Yellowstone National Park. They arrive and unload and while the pastor prepares dinner, the evangelist goes to explore the forest.

Half an hour later the pastor is just chopping the onions when he hears a roar and a commotion outside. He looks out of the window. The evangelist is running towards him, carrying a young grizzly bear which is struggling and kicking to be free. “Open the door”, he calls. “Open the door!” The pastor does as he is told.

The evangelist runs right up to the door of the cabin, throws in the grizzly bear, slams the door shut and calls through the window to the pastor: “You look after that one. I'll go and find some more”.

I suppose the burden of what I want to say this evening is that as our society and context change, so the role of the evangelist changes. And as the role of the evangelist changes, so the traditional distinctions between the evangelist and the pastor will begin to blur not to the point of the merging of these ministries but to the point where they share many of the same gifts and characteristics.

We are I think at a mid point in the journey and change in the role of the evangelist in the Church in the United Kingdom. Perhaps no other ministry has had to change and develop as rapidly over the last generation and the next generation.

The dynamic of change has been both outward and inward. Our society has shifted and altered very rapidly over the last century and particularly since the 1960's in its attitude to Christian faith and to religion generally. The churches have become more and more alive to the fact that we live now increasingly in a post Christian context and a context of mission. We have discovered partly through trial and error and partly through practice and reflection what is effective in this situation and what is not. And our role and understanding of the ministry of the evangelist has changed and adapted accordingly.

As it seems to me at the moment there have been two great Acts, two parts to this transition.

Part 1 began in the early 1980's and was largely completed and owned by the churches towards the end of the century. The change spanned about 20 years. It turned around the discovery that, as our society has changed, so it was no longer enough for the ministry of the evangelist to be only about the public proclamation of a summary of the gospel in the anticipation that men and women would respond with a saving faith and become, instantly, members of the church.

That pattern of evangelism was the norm, I would argue until the very early 1980s. It shaped the pattern of larger evangelistic initiatives and smaller parish missions. In its day it was hugely effective. It remains a helpful part of the ministry of evangelism today.

But it depends for its effectiveness on those who hear that evangelistic sermon already knowing the principle building blocks and components of the Christian faith. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the majority of people in any congregation or stadium would have learned that faith and the gospel story as children. As they listen to the evangelist preach the gospel message, the fire has already been laid. The preacher by God's grace brings the spark of the Spirit and that fire catches. The pieces of the jigsaw are already in place but they make no sense. During the worship service and the preaching the heart is touched, those jigsaw pieces are picked up, rearranged and set down in a new pattern.

What happens though if fewer and fewer people learned less and less of the Christian faith as children?

One sermon is unlikely to be enough to draw people to mature commitment. In the early 1980s, evangelists began to lay more and more emphasis on what was called at first follow up or nurture of new converts. It became apparent that more sustained teaching was needed. Nor was there a neat pattern of people responding to faith and then deepening that faith through teaching. Often they began to find faith through these small follow up groups. So did people who had been members of churches for many years. Eventually, the more forward looking churches simply began to offer these small group

teaching and learning experiences on their own – you didn't actually need the mission and the evangelistic speaker.

People needed to learn the faith as adults almost from the very beginning. That required much more than a one off encounter but an extended time for community, teaching, learning, prayer and relationships. In the late 1980's the course which would become Alpha began to take shape following these principles. In 1988, as a Vicar in Halifax, I began to experiment with a course called Christians for Life which the parish offered continuously for the next eight years in a very gentle, unspectacular way. Hundreds of people took part. Scores and scores of people came to faith. The course became in 1996 the nurture part of Emmaus the Way of Faith.

The ministry of the evangelist moved away from the one off encounter to a relationship and a community formed around fellowship and meals and time away and ongoing pastoral care as the first stage towards membership of the existing church and community. John Finney's key research, Finding Faith Today, identified the importance of this process. Scores and then hundreds of churches began offering Alpha and Emmaus courses and developing their own material. By the end of the decade, the process model had become the way in which the churches were doing evangelism – not occasionally but all the time. There is still a need for occasional guest services. But where this works best it is simply part of the ongoing life of the Christian community in every place. John Finney estimates that one million people took part in process evangelism groups in the 1990s. The vast majority found it a positive experience. Two in five churches offer this kind of group regularly. Five out of five ought to offer it. There is nearly always fruit.

So that is the first part of the change – the first stage of the journey. The evangelist moves from the pulpit at the guest service or the football stadium and comes into the church lounge, or the local pub or the vicarage and becomes someone you can laugh with, get to know, trust and learn from.

But even as the churches are consolidating that huge piece of learning and change – the change in society is continuing and changing. The process of secularisation is advancing generation by generation.

Around most churches there is still a fringe of people who will be attracted to an Alpha course or Emmaus group, praise God. But there are many more who are out of reach of the process evangelism courses. Or even if they come to Alpha they will have enormous difficulty then making the transition to 10.30 on Sunday mornings in a draughty church singing what seem to be ancient hymns with a community of people twice their age.

The process evangelism needs to continue – as does the evangelistic preaching. Woe betide the church if we cease to remind ourselves of the wonder of the gospel in the preached Word of God. But as the change continues around us, so God calls us to new ventures and to a second key shift.

Before I try and explain what that is, come with me to the Book of Acts and to one of the most dramatic moments in the whole of the New Testament as Paul comes alone, according to Luke's account, to the great pagan city of Ephesus at the beginning of Acts 19.

Ephesus has a special place in Luke's story. It marks the high water mark of fruitfulness in Paul's evangelistic ministry. He knew before and after this period many times of failure and frustration but in Ephesus, by God's grace, a new church was born which was to be a resource to the entire region and throughout the world.

Paul enters the city alone. He looks first for where God is at work. He finds a tiny group of disciples who know only the baptism of John. He teaches them more adequately and they are filled with the Spirit. There is a new Pentecost at the beginning of this new season of mission. Paul moves next to the synagogue and employs a different evangelistic method for three whole months. He is now the Rabbi, arguing persuasively. In Ephesus we see him actually being all things to all people. There comes a point at which that method no longer is effective and cannot be pursued. So Paul leaves and goes to the Gentiles, arguing daily in the lecture Hall of Tyrannus. Alongside this intellectual battle for the minds of his hearers there is a quieter ministry of signs and wonders and healing. That in turn builds until an exorcism goes wrong. Even that incident is used by God to draw people to faith. The very economy of the region is changed and the old religions are threatened by the spread of the gospel not only in the city but throughout the entire region.

In the next chapter, at the beginning of his great speech to the Ephesian presbyters, Luke has Paul look back and describe this period of evangelistic ministry in these words:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house”.

Paul in Ephesus shows us a different and more rounded model of evangelistic ministry from that of the preacher in the pulpit or the Alpha course leader in the church lounge.

What are its characteristics?

It is a ministry characterised by going to where people are rather than by an invitation.

It is a ministry based on the pattern of incarnation: being with people and living among them and alongside them and sharing in their hardships and sorrows. Paul begins his speech with the words: “You know how I lived” – literally you know how I was. This is personal ministry and about the sharing of lives.

It is a ministry characterised by service and humility – not seeking to gain anything from those one is seeking to reach.

It is a ministry that is responsive to the context: its methods twist and change and move from one means to another. “I did not shrink from doing anything helpful”.

It is a ministry that aims to build and form new communities within that place and culture. It is not seeking simply to enlarge one group of Christians or accommodate everyone within the same cultural framework. It's very clear from the divisions and debates within the New Testament that different congregations developed within the same cities.

It is a ministry that is responsive to the Spirit's leading in every possible way: Paul is seeking to discover what God is doing and join in – to keep in step with the Spirit who is moving ahead.

And it is a ministry characterised by suffering, by tears and by enormous perseverance: the hallmark quality of the pioneer evangelist.

It is a ministry, I believe, Paul describes by many titles but above all by the word diakonos – a word that is often obscured in our English translations because it can be translated servant or minister or ministry.

It is the ministry of the deacon-evangelist to go on behalf of the community; to draw alongside others and share their pains and sorrows; to serve; to respond to the context and the Holy Spirit; to form new communities beyond the existing church and to persevere through immense suffering and hardship until the job is done.

It is this shift to the ministry of deacon-evangelist that I observe is happening across the churches at the present time, which is still in its very early stages, which needs to be encouraged and nurtured and developed and which will be increasingly form the role and shape of the evangelists ministry in the 21st Century.

Let's go back for a moment to the changing shape of our society and relationship to the church. The knowledge of faith is declining with every generation.

According to the latest research, the UK population can be divided into four parts or segments. A small percentage belong to other faiths – around 6%. One third of the remainder are actively affiliated in some way to the Christian church. They claim to come either regularly or a few times a year. This is the group of people who are in reach of the churches as they are presently constituted. It remains a large mission field. It is also an ageing section of the population and therefore likely to decline over time.

The other two thirds are effectively, mainly, out of reach. One third have never had any meaningful contact with the Christian church. They know nothing about Christianity. They are unfamiliar with our beliefs, our hymns and worship, our traditions. The other third have had contact with the churches in the past but they have moved on and moved

away. Some residue of faith is there. But when asked if they are likely to return to church fewer and fewer of them say yes: 5% of the 30% in research done in March of this year.

Traditional churches and nurture groups are helpful and important and vital in reaching this portion of the population. They have a significant mission here. But they are not reaching, by and large, into those sections of the population that have no Christian background or who have consciously given up on the existing church.

For hundreds of years our society has been shaped in such a way as to draw the majority of the population in the rhythm of their year and the pattern of their lives to the doors and through the doors of the churches.

For generations we have lived in a context where the shaping of society brought most people, sooner or later to our doorstep. For baptism as children; for education; for marriage; in the rhythm of festivals protected legally by public holidays; in a rhythm of the week in which Sunday was legally preserved for worship; in times of sickness; in times of particular personal crisis; in bereavement and in death. The missionary calling of the church, the cure of souls, has been historically shaped by leading people from the door of the church to the altar, to drawing people deeper into Christian faith and community.

However, that picture now needs to be redrawn. The tectonic plates of culture and society have been shifting under our feet. That shifting is beyond our control. But the gospel calls us to respond to it creatively and decisively.

It is still true that for a proportion of the population, the culture and their heritage brings them, as it were, to the church doors at key times. Some were taught the faith as children. Some are drawn back in times of sickness and bereavement. Some are still being drawn back in increasing numbers at present by the festival of Christmas. So the need for the kind of evangelism that we have always done in traditional churches remains. In some ways the opportunities are greater than they have been for a generation.

But for another proportion of the population, the opposite is true. The shape of the culture carries them not towards the traditional church but away from it. The pattern of their lives does not allow for Sunday morning worship. Their cultural and educational background prevents their being able to access our liturgy and music. The rhythm of their year, the pattern of their lives, their life crises actually draw people away from traditional church not towards it. And every piece of research now indicates that this group as a proportion of the population is more than half and growing rapidly.

And that is why there has been this recent move from within the churches to hear again the great commission to go and make disciples: not to the other side of the world but to the other side of the street – to the sections of the community who will never be brought by the shaping of their lives to the doors of the church. These are the people loved by God. In the words of the Prayer Book, they are God's children in the midst of this naughty world.

And how are people enabled to hear in these contexts? Not through summaries of the gospel being preached at them. The seed will simply fall on stony ground and be snatched away. Not, initially, through being invited to come and learn directly about Christian faith – though there may in time be opportunity for that.

“You know how I lived,” said Paul.

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”

“As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

This shift, this movement has already begun.

Across the country, for a decade and more, pioneer evangelists have sensed the widening gap between church and culture and have begun to where people are, listened carefully to their context, served them by example, formed new communities, have begun to see people come to faith. They have gradually learned on our behalf that the end point of the process is precisely not then to draw people back into traditional churches but to allow and encourage a new Christian community to grow in appropriate ways for that group of people for that culture. That new community remains part of the one body of Christ but needs to be also distinct and separate – to be free to do things in a new way.

Those pioneer evangelists include the Church Army captain who moved some years ago with his family to an area of new housing with a brief not to draw people into the village churches nearby but to start a new Christian community there on the estate. They include the Anglican minister invited to go to a town in the West Midlands to begin a new kind of church for young adults across three deaneries because there was no-one under the age of fifty in any of the churches in the town. They include the two grandmothers in the rural south west who were angry and disturbed that their village church had no children in it on Sundays and those that came did not find a welcome. So they listened and prayed and began a new midweek event for parents and preschool children, which has now grown again that churches ministry to children and young families.

In 2004, not yet three years ago, the Church of England published a landmark report, *Mission Shaped Church*. *Mission Shaped Church* tried to describe all of this kind of activity and to develop language to describe it. The authors of the report coined a new term: *fresh expressions of church* for this kind of enterprise and activity. Going to where people are and beginning new communities of Christians. The report also said, in loud clear terms: this is a very good and right and appropriate development and we need to encourage and develop and nurture this kind of approach to evangelism and church life in every part of the country. It is not enough to minister to those who are like us, to those who are in reach. We also need to begin again in different places. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has called for the development of a mixed economy of church life in order to carry the good news to the whole of our society: fresh expressions

of church of many different kinds alongside traditional churches and congregations. The Church of England and the Methodist Church have committed themselves very deeply to encouraging and resourcing this movement of mission.

This is a serious and a welcome change and, I believe very deeply, a response to the call of God in a changing context. Church Army, the Church of England's recognised society of Evangelists, has committed itself to change and develop in this direction. The selection criteria for Church Army evangelists have already been changed. Church Army is currently revising its training in major ways. It has already transformed its criteria for deployment. All Church Army funded posts are now to be in pioneer situations to establish fresh expressions of church.

The Methodist Order of Deacons is currently reviewing diaconal ministry in the Methodist Church and is beginning to speak the language of pioneer ministry going beyond the congregation to serve the kingdom of God and build new communities through service and evangelism.

In 2005 the Church of England changed the selection criteria for all ordained ministry and for the first time since the Reformation included mission and evangelism as a specific criteria – evangelism which takes place from the existing church and which is also directed to the forming of new communities. In January this year the House of Bishops agreed a new set of guidelines for what we have called ordained pioneer ministry. There are 25 such ministers already in training and more in the pipeline. They will serve their curacies going to where people are, listening, serving, forming community and making disciples.

We are still quite near the beginning of this change and transformation. We are learning again about elements that have always been part of the ministry of the evangelist: going beyond; incarnation; forming community; making disciples; suffering for the gospel.

From the image of an evangelist as one who speaks we are learning to think of an evangelist as one who listens.

From the image of an evangelist as one who comes and goes with little personal investment we are learning to think of an evangelist as one who goes and then stays with a particular community nurturing it to life.

From the image of an evangelist as one who has an artificial smile and invites you to come to Jesus so that all your problems will disappear we are learning again with St. Paul to see an evangelist's ministry as marked by tears, endurance and compassion.

In our pictures of ordained ministry we have recognised for thousands of years that we need presbyters whose task is to sustain missionary communities through word and sacrament and lay ministers who can share in that ministry. Those missionary communities will be traditional parishes and these fresh expressions of church as they grow to maturity.

We have recognised increasingly in recent years that we need those who are called to ministries of oversight and leadership in churches to enable change and to enable mission: to connect together the body of Christ and enable new ministries.

We are beginning to recognise that we need to call and authorise ministers to go on behalf of the body of Christ to be where people are to call new communities into being and into the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is leading to a restoring of the ministry of evangelist as deacon and is the shape of the ministry we need for the church of the 21st Century.

But let the last word as well as the first belong to the great deacon evangelist St. Paul. In one of a number of remarkable passages in 2 Corinthians Paul speaks in defence and commendation of his ministry – his diakonia.

The leading edge of this commendation – the distinctive mark of his ministry – is quite clearly perseverance and patient endurance: the cluster of ideas in the Greek word hypomene.

“...as servants of God (diakonoι theou) we have commended ourselves in every way through great endurance...”

In the following verses Paul then unpacks what that endurance consists of. It is not a list for the faint-hearted.

Perseverance through nine kinds of difficulty:

“in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger...”

Perseverance in nine kinds of virtue:

“by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left....”

And perseverance in nine paradoxes which face the deacon evangelist:

“in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as imposters and yet are true; as unknown and yet are well known, as dying – and see we are alive; as punished yet not killed; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing everything”.

This ministry of pioneer evangelist, deacon evangelist is close to the ministry of Christ and of the apostles. It is a vital ministry in the life of the contemporary church as we seek to be all things to all people and by all means save some. It is one of the most profoundly difficult yet wonderful callings in Christian ministry. It is a calling that has always been

with us in different ways but at this time in particular a calling that God is restoring to his church.

Steven Croft