

**27 April 2008 Easter 5 Listening first
Acts 17: 22-31; John 14:15-21**

This is a great reading from Acts because in it we find Paul at his absolute best, and being the very model of a great missionary. And the reason he's a great missionary is because he's listened, he's observed. He's noticed what's sacred to the Athenians. He even knows their poetry – In him we live and move and have our being. He's gone about the city and looked carefully at the things that really matter to them. So he finds the common ground from which he can begin to tell his story, having first listened to theirs.

Now this isn't how the Church has always operated. One of our recently retired bishops, Douglas Cameron, tells the story of how he went out to Papua New Guinea as a very youthful missionary to assist a much older priest who'd been out there in the missions for years. Douglas arrived to discover that this priest's way of evangelising the natives was to erect a loudspeaker on top of the bamboo hut in which he lived and blast Choral Evensong from Kings College Cambridge right across the jungle. So not much respect for local culture there.

Similarly I remember going into the Anglican Cathedral in Hong Kong some years ago and marvelling, because for all you knew you could have been in Norfolk – because other than the fans battling against the heat there was nothing to tell you that you were in the East in a fabulous, vibrant city, with an amazing richness of art and history. Whoever built it clearly didn't walk around the city as Paul did, observing, listening, savouring the poetry of another culture.

Clearly you don't need a Gothic spire to be Church, any more than Paul would say you needed circumcision to be a Christian. Wherever Paul saw an obstacle to the sharing of the Gospel, he overcame it – food laws, purity laws, people getting hung up on which apostle they followed (I'm for Paul, I'm for Apollos). No, says Paul, I'll be all things to all men so that by any means I may save some. If Paul needs to know the language of Greek philosophy, he will; he'll get right alongside people so that he can read their own stories back to them, revealing the Jesus who's already there.

There's a wonderful book called "Christianity Rediscovered" by a Roman Catholic priest, Vincent Donovan. Vincent worked for a number of years in a missionary school in Kenya, but he observed that while lots of people would become Christians in order to use the schools or the hospitals (they'd come into the compound from all over the country to receive the education and the care and so on) at the same time Christianity as a living faith never really seemed to take root in their lives. Once people went back to their villages, they tended to go back to the indigenous religious practices they'd grown up with.

So Vincent asked his bishop for permission to stop teaching, and just go around the villages visiting the people, being with them, and above all listening to their stories. And the bishop allowed him to do this in a completely open-ended way for as long as it took, with no outcomes expected. He was just to be with the people. Like Paul, just to go about and observe and listen.

Now as an approach this was the absolute antithesis of what had gone before, because the European model of mission was to come into these places and into people's lives, almost as if they were some kind of blank slate on which the Christian story could be written like there was never anything there before.

But what Vincent discovered was that in fact the Gospel was already there. For several years he just listened, and then gradually as he gained the people's trust, he started to share the story of Jesus, woven in with stories they already had. They had salvation stories; they had their own sacramental meals, and once he knew about them Vincent was able to point to the Living Christ who was already there, right in the depths of their own traditions. For example, Vincent writes: "There was no need to explain to the Masai the symbolism of living, life-giving water. It was sacred to them long before I got there. Their word for God means rain – it being the most beautiful description of God they can think of".

I want to say this morning that the same principles hold true for us in how we share our faith. In a culture where the Vicar of Dibley is probably most people's most positive image of Church, we need to face up to a real challenge. Namely, have we listened? Have we cared deeply enough about the stories people are telling through their music, their films, their novels, their work, and most of all their lives? - because beyond a doubt the sacred is already there. In God we all live and move and have our being.

You know, I often find on baptism visits with young families that there can be a bit of suspicion on the part of maybe one of the parents who perhaps isn't a churchgoer – or even both of them if they're maybe doing this to keep granny happy. But you get talking to them about their hopes for this new baby who's just turned their lives upside down, you ask them about their hopes for this little sacred person, and before you know it you're on holy ground. And people who start off telling you, in the popular modern phrase, that they're spiritual but not religious, they end up saying: well if this is what it means, if resurrection means my baby is going to grow up knowing there's new hope every morning, that he won't have to carry yesterday's failure into today, that failing an exam or being dumped in a relationship or making any kind of a mess of things isn't the end – then you can sign me up. If Christianity values what I value then count me in.

Because our model here isn't just Paul, but Jesus, who lived thirty years among us, who listened to our human story before ever he preached a word. Which is why people were amazed at his insight, his sensitivity – come and see someone who told me everything I ever did! He speaks with authority, and not like our scribes.

So this is an evangelism any of us can do. Reverence what is already sacred in other people's lives. Do that, and there is nowhere the Good News cannot reach. Amen.