

Date: June 18, 2023 (Pentecost 3)

1. Texts: Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Ps. 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: apostolicity.
4. Aim: encourage, guide.
5. Proposition: "Since God made the Church apostolic, we are to go out to our world."

GOD SENDS HIS CHURCH OUT

Somehow, over the centuries, the Church came to neglect its God-given identity. When we did from time to time remember it, we frequently fulfilled our destiny badly. It's disheartening to think about it.

We could talk today about any number of aspects of the Church's identity. But because of the reading from Matthew's Gospel, we'll focus on only one: being apostolic.

We all know that we are apostolic. After all, we remind ourselves every time we say the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one, holy, catholic and *apostolic* Church." But, because of our neglect, many Anglicans don't even know what being apostolic means.

It starts out by meaning "apostle-like". Please note that this is not apostle-*LIGHT*, as if we're somehow less obligated than the original apostles. To be apostolic is to be like the apostles. Knowing this doesn't exactly get us much closer to recovering our identity as the Church. So...

According to the Bible, to be an apostle is to be a disciple sent out into the world to extend the reach of Christ. Jesus realized early on that humanity's need surpassed his time and energy.

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'¹

¹ Matthew 9:36-38.

So, Jesus appointed labourers to harvest souls for God and he sent them out to do his work in the world. These disciples who were sent out are apostles.

Then, at the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus reaffirmed this apostolic identity.

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'²

He said that he had the authority to design the Church as he wanted it, and then he said it was apostolic. The disciples were to go out into the world and extend the reach of Jesus himself.

For the first 1800 years of the Church's existence, we did go out into the world and make disciples of all nations—but we most often did that by conquering people. We made disciples at the end of a sword or at the end of a rifle. We coerced people into being baptized and punished them either culturally or economically if they refused. The Crusades and the colonizing efforts of both the English Empire and the countries of Central Europe are examples of how we practiced our apostolic identity. You'll probably agree that we did it badly. Throughout the centuries, the Church has been apostolic but poorly so.

Then, with the gradual dissolution of European empires, and with the rise of tolerance as a virtue, the Church slowly forgot that it was apostolic. This was accompanied by a slow rejection of all religious institutions. The Christian Church was especially disdained by the developing world. Societies, particularly those in Europe and North America, actively seek to shame the Church into silence. And the Church has largely given in to such pressures. We no longer have an appreciation for being apostolic. We have become "one, holy, catholic and *mumble-mumble* Church."

² Matthew 28:18-20.

EXCEPT Jesus created the Church as apostolic. Jesus had the power to design the Church as he wanted and he created it to be apostolic. He ordered us out into the world, to extend his ministry to save souls. The need for salvation far outstripped his time and ability to reach people. Jesus required an apostolic Church in order to get his work done.

Our divine identity has not been changed or deleted. We are still the one, holy, catholic and *apostolic* Church. We have been sent out by Jesus to make disciples in whatever society and culture they find themselves.

But we have to do it in ways that respect and reflect the gospel. You can't use violence or threats to create disciples. You can't coerce or force someone to believe in Jesus. None of those tactics are loving and respectful. Whatever strategies we use, they must all reflect the gospel itself.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.³

Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.⁴

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.⁵

Now we just have to figure out what this will look and sound like in practical terms.

³ John 15:12.

⁴ 1 Peter 3:15b-16a.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 24b-25.

Extending Jesus' reach in our world starts first in our own heads, with our own attitudes. The Christian rejects any idea of being superior. The Christian resists every attempt to convert anyone. The apostolic disciple is only an ambassador for Christ and a living proclamation of his gospel. We disciples embody Christ's gospel so that others may be invited to respond positively to him.

Since we are living examples of his gospel, we make our proclamation using our own experiences of faith and faithfulness. When sharing our stories, we always begin with the pronoun I. "I'm working on this issue right now and asking God to help me with it." "I found that worshipping with others on Sundays has helped me get through this." "I think God may be trying to speak to me through what the Bible says."

Then, in order to extend the invitation to interact with God, you ask, "What do you think?" Of course, you have to be able to accept whatever the other person has to offer. You cannot try to argue with them or convince them that your position is the one right one. St. Peter cautioned us to treat the other person with gentleness and respect. So, we make our proclamation using our own faith experiences and then listen for whatever insights the other person may have.

And always we have the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour and Lord at the forefront of our minds. Our goal in such conversations is to so re-present Christ that others are intrigued by him and their curiosity is awakened. We're looking for the paths into their spirits upon which Jesus himself will walk at our sides.

So we ask, "What do you think?" We listen to what they have to say. We respond with, "I hear you. I tend to think... In my experience... I have found..." We avoid the use of the words but and should. Then, as the conversation is winding down, we might try this, but only if it is appropriate and you are being prompted by God to use it: "Listen, I don't know what your schedule is like, but I'd like to take you to Church with me sometime. You'd get a better sense of what I'm talking about." Now, don't chicken out, but also don't extend the invitation to come to Church before its time.

We are the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ because he made us that way. Christ sends us out into the world to extend his reach into the lives of those about whom we care. We are his invitations to salvation. By embodying his gospel, we proclaim his love. We use our own stories to share his story of faith and faithfulness. That's exactly what it means to be apostolic and Jesus has made us so.

AMEN.