

Sermon for St Stephen's Westminster – 9 February 2020

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable to you, O LORD.

I am most grateful to Graham for his invitation today, in this church where my wife Alison so much enjoys being part of your community. I did wonder whether Graham had particularly invited me to preach on this Sunday, as one of the appointed verses for today from 1 Corinthians is “And I came to you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling.”

A long time ago, when I was twenty, with three friends I was able to spend a month in the summer visiting Christian communities in north India and Nepal. First we visited the Delhi Brotherhood, which until six years before had been known as the Cambridge Mission to Delhi. At first it seemed a relic from the past, when a kindly older brother explained that, after he had been ordained, he had come out from Cambridge for two years, only to be still in Delhi fifty two years later. It seemed incongruous when we sat down for tea at four o'clock, surrounded by a splendid theological library. And yet, as we listened more, we could not fail to be impressed by the wonderful service which the brothers had given, acting as amongst the first bishops in the new ecumenical Church of North India, and spending most of their time serving the poor of the slums of Delhi, in a great range of social and Christian outreach projects.

Two weeks later we stayed at Bishops College in Calcutta, and we visited the range of projects established by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in that city. These included homes for disabled and orphaned children, soup runs for those living in shacks at the side of city roads, and the pioneering Kalighat home for the dying, which was one of the earliest forms of hospice. One day our host at Bishops College explained that, if Mother Teresa was at home in her convent, she was likely to welcome us as visitors. I remember very well the twenty minutes we talked to her, and particularly her message that we did not need to come to Calcutta to serve God, because there was much human need for us to minister to, and to share love with, wherever we found ourselves.

In our Gospel reading this morning we heard of Jesus saying to his disciples “you are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” It is easy for us to see that the modern day prophet, Mother Teresa, let her light shine in this way. Our challenge this morning is to understand what this should mean for us, and how we might create light which we would be happy for others to see, and which might lead others to God. There is a clue further on in the Gospel passage, which talks of us obeying God's commandments, and teaching others to do the same. We do not have to be famous like Mother Teresa to do this; we all can in our own contexts. And I hope some of you will agree, at this particular time, that serving God's commandments should involve looking beyond our own contexts, particularly looking around the world and at how our faith is shared around the globe. What are the different ways in which we can each best serve God, so that our light shines? What is the overall mission of this Church, particularly beyond its parish boundary?

Two years ago I offered to become chair of the Trustees of USPG, the Anglican mission agency which works to unite Anglican churches around the world, by partnering each other to serve God in mission.

It does a great job in working to support Anglican churches in education and health projects in some of the poorest parts of the poorest countries. It has a remarkable heritage, formed in 1701 as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, by Thomas Bray, who also formed the Christian publishing house SPCK. In its first century it focused on mission in America, and after American independence it spread rapidly, principally to British colonies but also more widely. The Universities' Mission to Central Africa, founded by David Livingstone, joined SPG in 1965 to form the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, now known as the United Society Partners in the Gospel. What is important today is that USPG has a strategy relevant to the 21st Century. No more can we be about sending white colonialists to former colonies, or about London dictating what happens elsewhere. Now USPG is all about the Anglican churches around the world treating each other as partners, all equally valued parts of the body of Christ. We still fund projects in the poorest parts of the world, but now these projects are proposed and led by the partner churches. We still train clergy, particularly the church leaders of the future, around the world, but instead of bringing them to Cambridge or to Selly Oak Birmingham, we help fund the training of clergy in their own regions of the world. One of the most exciting initiatives is the new Asian Theological Academy, a virtual college, whose annual gathering for refresher training takes place in Sri Lanka each summer.

A few years ago I returned to the Delhi Brotherhood, this time accompanied by our then teenage children. What was wonderful to see, amidst the great library and the same buildings, was that the brothers were now all Indian. The spirit of the place in providing leadership for the Church of North India is just as strong, indeed more relevant in the modern context. The brothers are now responsible for 19 projects in the slums of Delhi, acting out their Christian mission through pioneering work, like upholding the rights of women who have been oppressed by the men in their society. The Brotherhood is still supported by USPG. Recently one of our Trustees, Bishop Jonathan Ford, described his moving visit to the Brotherhood and its work, as part of his transition from being Bishop of Southampton to becoming the Dean of York.

You can learn about USPG's current strategy on its website. It involves standing alongside Anglican churches where to be a Christian requires so much more sacrifice than it does in Britain. I recently met a priest from the Philippines, whose Bishop has been imprisoned because he and his Church had been standing up for the rights of indigenous people, whose way of life had been devastated by international mining activities, which the Philippine Government and its Army wanted to foster. It was very humbling to hear him speak. USPG's work also involves supporting those in the poorest countries who are most directly affected by climate change, and those whose way of life is so much more limited by their gender.

There are still opportunities for individuals to offer short periods of service from Britain to partner churches overseas, through the Journey with Us programme. It is recognised that the impact may be as transformative for the individual going on the journey as anything else. Recently I met Kate, an experienced young nurse from Norwich, who had just returned from a nine month placement with the church in Nicaragua. She had been sharing her experience of offering palliative care with hospitals in that country, where the concepts of palliative care are much less well known and practised. She was full of enthusiasm for her experience, and what she had been able to share. USPG is always on the lookout for individuals who might be willing to participate, from recently graduated young people to those with much more experience, including those in the transition to retirement.

I am delighted that St Stephen's has recently been supporting the work of USPG generously. This enables USPG to co-fund mission programmes with Anglican churches all around the poorer parts of the world. Of course St Stephen's has on its own been supporting work in Burma, now Myanmar, faithfully for many years, particularly at the Holy Cross Theological College. In parallel with this USPG has been supporting the Anglican church's work in Myanmar in community health programmes which reach the most rural areas. These train voluntary local health workers who then reach the most isolated rural communities, which the Myanmar Government's own health programme does not reach. The very encouraging thing about this programme, which the church has delivered locally for six years, is that steadily the Government's rural healthcare has improved, so the church is expected to wind up the programme next year, and develop instead a new initiative to boost provision of education in secondary schools and universities, which USPG will support instead. I understand that Joanna Smith's links with Myanmar are so treasured that when the Archbishop of Myanmar visits London he always makes a visit to Joanna, and he is coming tomorrow to London as a guest of the General Synod. Since churches and individuals may prefer to support a specific programme of work funded by USPG, we run a scheme called Partners in Mission which sets out ten projects around the world which churches and individuals might wish to support. Do take a copy of that booklet, or other material which describes the work of USPG, from the table at the back of church after the service, if you would like to.

Organisations like USPG help us to understand how the church can work effectively around the world, in a modern context. We pray, Lord, that you will enable us to share in this mission, to be the light of the world, and in the words of Mother Theresa enable us to help meet the needs of others, wherever we are. Amen.

John Neilson, Chair of USPG

John Neilson is Secretary of Imperial College London. Before that he worked in central Government including as Principal Private Secretary to the Energy Secretary, director of gas and electricity regulator Ofgem and leading the team advising ministers on the universities' research budget. He has just completed a ten-year term on the Audit Committee of the Archbishops' Council.