

Homily: Adrian Lyons SJ
May 17, 2009: Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

I'm grateful to have learnt this week the Chinese proverb: "When the wind blows, do we build windmills or walls?" The irony of course is that the Chinese built the Great Wall rather than harness the fierce winds sweeping in from Mongolia. Presumably they believed the Middle Kingdom would last forever and remain unchanged in its structures and culture, much as we used to think the Catholic Church would continue after the Council of Trent.

There's something within us that deeply desires continuity, something that treasures the conviction that we should never have to begin again from nowhere. That we should not have to start off again without the history and tools and wisdom and stories that we value. We count on these as resources to guide us into the future. But as we now realise, in secular matters as well as religious, these resources on their own are insufficient when we face the utterly new.

Browsing through today's Scripture readings, I was struck by the way the Holy Spirit moves way out ahead of the early Christian community as represented by St Peter. True, Peter had accepted that non-Jews can, under certain strict conditions, be admitted to the community centred on the risen Jesus. He and James, the brother of Jesus, had a celebrated debate provoked by that troublemaker Paul of Tarsus, about what precise conditions should be imposed before admitting people like you and me into the Christian community. Now, in his encounter with the centurion Cornelius, Peter has advanced to the point where he can proclaim those wonderful words: "The truth, I have now come to believe, is that God has no favourites". Astonishing, coming from a proud member of the Chosen People.

The mixed Jewish-Gentile communities are beginning to glimpse God's ample vision that encompasses all peoples within the Kingdom of God.

This vision opens up a broad understanding of what our Christian mission might mean. To grasp this vision, we need to go back to a time before the Christian community amounted to anything like an institutional world-wide Church. Once the Church we know - the set of linked communities sharing doctrine, ritual and leadership - was in place, it was easy to believe that our main task is to bring into the fold people of every nation, culture and way of life. We believed we were sent out in order to rescue people from the world, and like good fishermen and women, capture them and bring them safely into the God's Kingdom. That's one version of the Church's missionary enterprise, the kind that inspired Francis Xavier to move on from Goa, where the Portuguese-Indian Church was already established, to the countries we now know as Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan - and of course his dying hope was China. Francis came to preach, convert, baptise and leave behind pastors to nurture the new Christians. His is one model of mission.

There's at least one other, and perhaps more radical, form of mission, one inspired by the sheer generosity of a Creator God who deploys the whole vast universe, much vaster than we can imagine, simply for the joy of it. With that God in mind, our mission might take the form of offering ourselves, our talents, our time, and our willingness to assist anyone who will welcome us in any way they ask. And not just those who have some claim on us, but, by preference, those who don't - without asking anything in return. It seems to me Jesus' own sense of mission was very like this, long before anything existed that we'd recognize as his Church. It's a form of mission simple and selfless.

And yet, as the former *National Geographic* photographer DeWitt Jones would remind us, even this is only one answer, one way of seeing the missionary task. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in John's Gospel: "You will do even greater things than these". Greater even than his own actions, would we believe?

Certainly bringing good news to people is central to Jesus work - in the past, present and future. We should be confident that we come with something precious to offer. But we don't always need to come with nets and hooks, or even with the desire to affiliate others to us and to our ways of seeing the world. Rather, discovering the blessedness others already enjoy and alerting them to its source, and then staying to celebrate what gives them joy - this seems to me a another valid way of being sent, received and welcomed.

I am haunted by the memory of those Sisters of Mercy, originally from Ireland, who came from Argentina to South Australia when persecution drove them out of Buenos Aires. I don't imagine they had much idea what they would find at Port Misery and beyond, but they showed wonderful willingness to be sent to people they'd never met and to place themselves at their service. Education and works of compassion followed, tailored to the needs of the fragile new settlements in Adelaide and Mount Gambier.

I think often of the space probes shot into space on a mission to explore some corner of our galaxy, without any hope they'll ever return. I wonder if they are not images of the way missionaries - you and I - may imagine ourselves in future.

Certainly the task of Church formation and keeping our present communities alive and lively is important. But it's not for that purpose only that we reach out to people beyond the Christian fold. God's vision is broader and deeper than that. It's time to allow our imaginations to be stretched, don't you think?

Allow me to end with a quotation from Brendan Byrne SJ, à propos today's Scripture readings: "There is no joy like suddenly discovering we are loved by someone we would very much like to be loved by, but never dreamed we'd be thought worthy of, or even be considered attractive enough. Such love and such joy is pure gift".

That's a gift we enjoy, and one we can offer to others, whoever they may be.