

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads **14th Sunday after Pentecost, 2 September 2007**

Dear Friends,

In October our Province is holding a 'Common Life Missions Conference'. A Diocesan committee has the somewhat grandiose title 'Diocesan Council for World Mission'. One of the more recent how-to books doing the rounds is called 'Mission-Shaped Church'. In the 1990s 'evangelism' was the catchword. 'Mission', it seems, the mantra for this decade. Lest there be any confusion, let me state clearly: there is no 'church' except in the context of mission – that is, the believers who are sent to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. There is no 'christian' except in the context of the mission of Christ, embodied in the community of believers, the church. For this reason, among others, there can be no such thing as a 'solo christian', no 'private baptism', no 'christian without church'. Having said that, it has to be admitted that the current obsession with the word 'mission' adds nothing new, but does reveal a great deal about near-maniac levels of anxiety and fear in the church. Perhaps the greatest impediment to mission is that we think it's something we do. True, statements about mission always talk about God's mandate. But listen carefully to the tone and what we find is a mode of discourse and behaviour which is really no different from any business plan. Mission, we are busy telling ourselves, is what we must work harder and harder to construct. We trust administrators more than saints, working parties more than prophets. Strategy for mission is something we invent and develop. Actually, this is a heresy, a deathly cocktail of ego-centrism and idolatry.

The truth is that the mission is not ours at all. The mission - the Christian mission that is - belongs to God. It is the self-giving Love of God who is Communion, who shares existence with what did not exist and responded to what could not respond, whose mission Jesus embodied, by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The universe is God's 'Other'," wrote John V Taylor, "upon which his love is working to bring it to the capacity of making its free, conscious response of love, mirroring his own love." Theologically, we name this originating principle 'Father/Mother'. The One who gives being and form to God's desire, whose mission gives it flesh and blood, we call God the Son. "The divine 'Oh yes!' which burns in God's patience and kindles our awareness... is what we call Holy Spirit." We make a fatal error the moment we forget this fundamental fact of the Christian proclamation – the only mission there is God's. It is both nonsense and arrogant to presume to plan God's mission. It is both essential and liberating to realise that God's mission predates my little plans by immense millennia, and comes to us from the future God has already fashioned which we call the Kingdom. So what, then, is our task in the light of this? The Scriptures witness time and again to this remarkable and truly mysterious fact: "God chooses not to act solo in relation to the world, but always with and through its creatures." God invites us to be God's partners, co-creators. That is truly astonishing, and totally transforming.

With my love,
David