

God's blueprint for ministry

Second Sunday in Advent (C)

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And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

These words of Paul were written to a fledgling church that he had helped plant while he himself was in prison facing an uncertain future. These might have been in his mind his last contact with the church and as a book it is a wonderfully uplifting text encouraging them to grow in their faith to maturity. Unlike many of the other epistles of Paul, this does not have the tone of a disappointed leader when things are going wrong but are words for those experiencing success. Perhaps this is a good time for us to hear them as well, for as a parish we are having a good run. Not without problems, but there are a lot of good and positive things happening.

This is my prayer says Paul - And he was a man prayer, praying for those with whom he had come into contact. It was not just a wish list, but an earnest desire to see God at work in their lives. And is this not a model for us, not only the church leaders, but for each of us to hold up before God, individuals and groups desiring God to be at work. Were I to ask you whom are you praying for, then your answer would tell me of your engagement with others and with your urgency for evangelism.

We tend to pray for those who are sick or for the lost in distant lands, but our calling to evangelism, to reaching out to others for the sake of the Gospel demands us to pray regularly for those outside the church who God brings across our path. In cursillo, there is a motto - speak first to God about people before speaking to people about God. This is not just a catch phrase, but the whole purpose of our being. And our prayer is to be that God will be at work in their lives so much that they will discover him and his love expressed in Jesus.

So what does Paul pray for? That they might have love overflowing into knowledge and insight. Here it is - heart before head, and the sense of the Greek, is not knowledge facts, but awareness. In other words Paul begins from the love which when experienced, draws one into awareness and insight. They will know what to do, because of their experience of love, and this overwhelming love of God, should be our guide as well. It is all very well for the bible to be pushed, but until we discover the love that it describes in our own individual lives, and in our corporate life. All too often it becomes used as a legal document in order to determine who is pure and blameless and more particularly, who is not.

Paul talks of the harvest of righteousness, and this word is fruit - and this links us with his teaching of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5. Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness and self-control. These are fruit that make up the harvest of righteousness, and like the harvest of the fields, they will develop most fully in the right conditions.

Paul these as an atmosphere of love developing awareness and insight.

So what about us. Is this not something for us to strive for? Is this not a blueprint for our ministry?

Evangelism and proclamation of the Gospel is not about trying to persuade others to believe what I do, but confronting them with an alternative that they can't refuse. Christians are called to infiltrate the world and bring God's love wherever we go. . Our lives as God's people should be the message that proclaims the meaning of Jesus life, death and resurrection. The powerful testimony of a life changed through an encounter with Jesus will do more than any sermon or other words. We are not about teaching people jargon, or putting them through programmes, but about loving them as individuals as God loves them. I am not to tell them that they should be like me, but to live in such away that they want to be like me, or at least to have what I have. This love leads to the awareness of God and a response to him.

So we start evangelism with our own personal relationship with God. Have we an experience of God's overwhelming love? Are we aware of his presence daily? Is there a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

It is as we begin to ask ourselves these questions and to answer them that we can start to see how much our faith will influence others. Do not get me wrong, there are times in which we need to speak, but more often we need to live. Conversion is not about the head, but about the heart.

So our challenge is to live so that others are challenged. This Christmas season is a good opportunity, because in the midst of all the hype, there is that sense that the child in the manger means something. We have an open opportunity to enter into to issue of faith with others, and we will see many people come through the church doors that would not normally be here. As Anglicans, we have a huge advantage, as we do not insist on anything more than the desire to be recognised as Anglican to belong. All Christians in general and in particular all Anglicans belong, but many do not know that yet. Perhaps we should take time to invite the less regular and ensure that they feel a part of the group. Look around and see who God has given you to invite.

This Advent, let you and I take up the sense of urgency that the season implies and not put off sharing God's love with our neighbours. Let us make Paul's vision a blueprint for our parish.

AMEN