

GRAHAM KINGS

The Redress of Mission ¹

In this sermon, preached last Pentecost, Graham Kings offers us a fresh and dynamic framework for understanding Christian mission. Adapting a phrase from the poet Seamus Heaney, Kings explores ways in which the concept of 'redress' can be applied to mission, as evangelism, compassion and working for justice interact.

Last year I saw Alan Bennett's play *Forty Years On* at the Arts Theatre in Cambridge. It was brilliant and full of witticisms. As Lady Dundown (wonderful name) scans the newspaper, she comments 'I see the Dean of Windsor has been made Bishop of Bombay'. To which Withers, the butler, replies: 'Bombay. Hmm. If I may say so, Ma'am, that seems to me to be taking Christianity a little too far.'²

Many today agree with that withering reply. They believe that Christianity should be kept, in effect, for Christians; that it is somewhat eccentric to share the good news of Jesus Christ in far distant cultures and with people of other faiths. Now, 'eccentric' may be the right word, actually, in terms of moving out from the centre to the edge. Jesus promised at his ascension 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8) – even to Bombay!

We celebrate the coming of that Holy Spirit today, on Pentecost Sunday, and we shall be considering the effect of the Spirit as 'the Redress of Mission'. I am using the old word 'redress' in the double sense that Seamus Heaney used it, in his lectures on poetry in Oxford, entitled *The Redress of Poetry*.³

The first sense is of poetry (or, I am suggesting, mission) 'being instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world, poetry (or mission) as an intended intervention into the goings-on in society'.⁴ The second sense is 'to set (a person or thing) upright again, to raise again to an erect position.... to restore, re-establish'.

The first Ramsden Sermon was preached 150 years ago in 1848 by the Revd Henry Melville, Fellow of Peterhouse, on the required subject 'Church Extension Over the Colonies and Dependencies'; nowadays, after the end of Empire, the title has been reworded as 'Church Extension Overseas, especially within the Commonwealth'.

1 The University of Cambridge Ramsden Sermon, delivered on Sunday 31 May 1998, at Great St Mary's, the University Church. Text: Acts 2:1-21.

2 Alan Bennett, *Alan Bennett: Plays One*, Faber and Faber, London 1996, pp 39f.

3 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, Faber and Faber, London 1995.

4 Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, p 192.

John V. Taylor, in his classic book *The Go-Between God: the Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, wrote of the coincidence of a new missionary dynamic with each recovery of faith in the immanent Spirit of God. He listed the links between the renewal of the Spirit and the 'eccentric' mission of the church, something we heard of in our reading from Acts 2: the Celtic Church, the Franciscans, the Jesuits and the modern missionary movement coming out of the enthusiasm of the eighteenth century revival. Taylor went on to mention the word 'extension', which, as we have seen, is part of the subject for the Ramsden Sermon. 'Mission is often described as if it were the planned extension of an old building. But in fact it has usually been more like an unexpected explosion.'⁵

So let's look again at this explosive, outward sending Spirit of God, descending on the disciples: first they are filled, then they are sent. As a new-born child draws in great gulps of breath and then cries out immediately (in *all* sorts of directions), so the new-born people of God breathe the Spirit and cry the Word, upwards and outwards.

For now is the new era, now is the new time. During this period of university exams, I have enjoyed rediscovering some howlers from other occasions. A schoolboy was once asked to define the word 'anachronism' and wrote: 'an anachronism is something that could not have happened until after it did.' Well, you can see what he was getting at. The writer of the Fourth Gospel shows clearly that the Spirit could not come before Jesus had been glorified (John 7:39) – it would have been anachronistic – but now *is* the time.

Pentecost is the New Testament word for the Feast of Weeks, when the wheat harvest was celebrated by a one-day festival, during which specific sacrifices were made. This festival, fifty days after the Passover, also remembered the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Luke stretches language to describe this extraordinary event. A sound 'like the rush of a mighty wind', 'tongues, as of fire appeared among them and rested on each of them'. As prophesied by John the Baptist, they were 'baptized with Spirit and with fire'.

Being touched with fire and being sent out in mission reminds me of Isaiah's vision in the temple, recorded in Isaiah 6. 'I saw the Lord and his train filled the temple,the foundations shook and the house was filled with smoke.' The angel took a glowing coal and touched his lips. 'Whom shall I send?' 'Here am I, send me.'

The disciples spoke in tongues and praised God. It was this cacophony of praise that drew the crowd, Jews from all parts of the empire who were in Jerusalem for the festival. Luke is typically specific in his bubbling, rushing, list of nations: 'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia', etc. They heard the praise of God, in their own vernacular languages, about the great things God had done recently. No wonder they were amazed and perplexed as they saw this bunch of Galileans (from *Galilee* of all places) breaking the language barriers of Babel (Genesis 11). What can this mean? Others scoffed and blamed this burst of enthusiasm on drink.

5 John V. Taylor, *The Go-between God: the Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, SCM Press, London 1972, p 53.

Another schoolboy howler is the answer to the question 'what is the meaning of the word "bibulous"?': 'a bibulous person is one who quotes freely from the Scriptures.' In his preaching that day Peter certainly does that, quoting from Joel 2 and also from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 – very bibulous, and very effective.

This double reaction to God's perplexing, eccentric, mission – of inquiry or of contempt – has occurred throughout the centuries and is with us still today. How do we react to the evangelistic power, and problems, of Pentecostalism worldwide and particularly to the charismatic movement *within* our own traditions? In Latin America, as the Catholic Church courageously declares God's 'preferential option for the poor', the poor are showing a preferential option for the Pentecostals!

When we hear of the exponential growth of the church in Africa, from an estimated 10 million Christians in 1900 to 340 million in 2000, how do we react? Sometimes this wonderful news produces a joy similar to Luke's bubbling, tumbling list of nations. Sometimes it evokes sneers – 'well, primal Africans may be flocking into the kingdom now, but just wait as the acid of modernity begins to eat into their joy of the gospel.'

In 1942 William Temple preached his enthronement sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury. He referred to the presence of Christians throughout all the nations of the world as 'the great new fact of our era'. At the close of this century, the 'great new fact' of *our* era is not just to do with presence but sheer numbers. The fact is that the demographic centre of gravity of world Christianity has now shifted from the 'north' of the world to the 'south'. The continents of Latin America, Africa and Asia are where *most* Christians live and worship and share the vibrant good news of God. In the Early Church at Antioch and then everywhere, the Gentiles flooding into the church produced tensions, changed its character and renewed its theology; these three things are now happening in world Christianity, as the very shape of the church changes and its centre of gravity has shifted. We see here an example of the first meaning of the 'Redress of Mission': correcting imbalances in the world. The churches of the south are the extraordinary fruit of the modern missionary movement. That movement included countless indigenous women and men from Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as mission partners from the 'north'. Mission has redressed the demographic balance of world Christianity. Now that has shifted, mission partners from the south are coming to evangelize the north in a new, reverse redress of mission.

What should be the proper response of a university to this great new fact of our time? Perhaps it should be 'what does this mean?': a response of inquiry rather than of contempt. Currently, two research projects in the Faculty of Divinity, the North Atlantic Missiology Project and Christianity in Asia, are studying this question. We are aided by the focus of resources in the University Library. These include the archives and library of the British and Foreign Bible Society and of the Royal Commonwealth Society. The latter could provide material for a thousand Ramsden Sermons. To these have recently been added the archives of SPCK, celebrating their tercentenary this year. Until the move here, these were the last major missionary archives in Britain not housed in a university library.

These resources help towards the second meaning of the 'Redress of Mission' mentioned earlier: 'to set something upright again, to raise again to restore, to

re-establish'. In the lectures on poetry to which I have referred, Seamus Heaney stressed:

I have been intent upon treating poetry as an answer given in terms of metre and syntax, of tone and musical trueness; an answer given also by the unpredictability of its inventions and its need to go emotionally and artistically 'over the brim', beyond the conventional bounds.⁶

Those last phrases remind me of the genius and heart of true mission and its study, which bubbles up from the very being of God and overflows unpredictably 'over the brim', beyond all conventional bounds, stretching even – perhaps especially – categories of theology. Ivan Illich describes the study of mission as:

the science about the Word of God as the Church in her becoming; the Word as the Church in her borderline situations; the Church as a surprise and a puzzle; the Church in her growth; the Church when her historical appearance is so new that she has to strain herself to recognize her past in the mirror of the present.⁷

The past of mission history is being remembered this decade, with both penitence and thanksgiving. As well as SPCK's tercentenary this year, and USPG's in 2001, we have had the bicentenaries of the Baptist Missionary Society (1992), the London Missionary Society – now the Council for World Mission – (1995), and next year is the turn of the Church Mission Society.

At the turn of this millennium, what sort of stories exemplify mission redressed? I served with CMS in Kenya for seven years at a theological and development college in the foothills of Mount Kenya. Bishop David Gitari (now Archbishop) was deeply involved in preaching against both local and national injustices, particularly the rigging of elections.⁸ In Heaney's words, this was indeed 'an intended intervention into the goings-on in society'.

This prophesying was partnered with primary evangelism. The diocese stretched from the mountain right up to the semi-arid areas of the north and to the border with Ethiopia. In 1985, in the north at a place called Kargi, west of Marsabit, a group of Rendille nomads heard the name, and good news, of Jesus Christ for the first time. They responded to the Kenyan evangelists with a practical question. What they needed was water: could this Jesus supply their need? The evangelists suggested they prayed and they did. After they had gone back to Marsabit, the Rendille dug, where they had prayed, in the dry wadi where there hadn't been water for years and years. And they found water. They really did, and named the well, the Jesus Well. When others came, they had to explain the meaning of the name. Later, when a group were ready for baptism, they were baptized in the answer to their own prayers.

In 1994 I visited Bangladesh and was taken to see the most unusual theological college I have ever seen, near Dhaka. All the students (about 45 of them) and all

6 Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, p 192.

7 Ivan Illich, *Mission and Midwifery: Essays on Missionary Formation*, Mambo Press, Gweru 1974, pp 6f. Cited in David J. Bosch,

Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Orbis Books, Maryknoll N.Y. 1991, p 493.

8 David Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season: Sermons to a Nation*, Regnum, Oxford 1996.

the faculty members, apart from one, were Muslim converts. The exception was a missionary, from Korea, one of forty Koreans serving in Bangladesh. Five of the students were dressed very differently: they were former Sufi Pirs, holy men of the mystical tradition in Islam. The Principal told me the story of their leader. He had been a healer, as a Sufi Pir, and had 2000 disciples, but when he became ill, he could not heal himself. He went to the Principal, who prayed for him, in the name of Jesus, and he was healed. He became a Christian and 40% of his disciples followed him into Christ. The rest were very hostile. Worship was still in the Islamic cultural way: we took off our shoes bowed down to the ground, and chanted the Bible readings with Islamic chants. The college kept a low profile but they were providing ministers for indigenous Islamic orientated churches which are very effective at sharing the good news with the majority community.

Earlier I had visited a leprosy mission hospital in the far north and gone out, on the back of a motorbike, to visit a field clinic. On the front of the bike was an English missionary doctor I'd known from student days. He and his wife (also a trained doctor) had given up promising careers in this country to serve the poorest of the poor and bring them good news of healing. I was very moved. They described to me the breakthrough in the drug treatment of leprosy. A new combination of four drugs had brought the treatment time down from twenty years to two years and then to six months. Now that was truly good news, worth passing on.

These stories show that the 'redress of mission' involves interweavings between evangelism, compassion and justice. One could say that these interweavings lead us to 'believing three ways in one mission'. These three (evangelism, compassion and justice) are not so much incoherent as co-inherent – they interpenetrate. In our reading from Acts we heard of the filling of the Spirit, of the praise of the Father and of the witness to the Son. As in the eternal Trinity, so also in 'mission redressed'. There is no grasping for primacy between these three, but only mutual reflections of glory.

As on the day of Pentecost, so today, we are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Our movement into God in worship leads us out, re-dressed for mission, into his world. I finish with a meditation on a prayer stool, written 10 years ago, when we were in Kenya:

The Prayer Stool

I leave aside my shoes, my ambitions,
undo my watch, my timetable,
take off my glasses, my views,
unclip my pen, my work,
put down my keys, my security,
to be alone with you,
the only true God.

After being with you,
I take up my shoes to walk in your ways,
strap on my watch to live in your time,
put on my glasses to look at your world,
clip on my pen to write up your thoughts,
pick up my keys to open your doors.⁹

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9 Graham Kings, 'The Prayer Stool' in Jenny Robertson, ed., *A Touch of Flame – an Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry*, Lion Publishing, Oxford 1989, p 120.