

THE MISSION OF JESUS THEN AND NOW: 3rd SUNDAY c

There is a storyⁱ about a people who had never heard of the Gospel. One day a stranger arrived and announced, 'I came to bring you the good news.' Unfortunately he contracted a disease and died before he could tell them what he meant. They found a small book in his rucksack. The title read: *The Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. They concluded that this is what the stranger was talking about. They began to read it.

Though the book was old, the message sounded brand-new. The central character leaped out at them from its musty pages – a man full of vitality, yet possessing great gentleness and compassion. They read accounts of miracles he performed on behalf of sick and needy people. They read how he went out of his way to associate with outcasts. The beauty and authority of his words made a deep impression on them. What a strange and fascinating book! 'What a pity the carrier of the book died,' someone said. 'Obviously he was a follower of this Christ.' 'But there must be more where he came from,' another said. 'Could we not send someone there to see how the people live this new teaching? Then he could come back, make a report, and perhaps we could try it for ourselves?'

They chose Francis, a young man of deep integrity. He travelled widely and observed keenly. He went out of his way to meet as wide a cross-section as possible. He didn't jump to conclusions or rush to judgement. Finally the day came when he felt he had seen enough, and so he headed for home. No sooner had he arrived back than he was bombarded with questions: 'Do the adherents of the book love one another?' 'Do they live in peace with one another?' 'Do they live simply?' 'Are they happy? But all the questions could be reduced to one: 'Do the followers of Christ live according to The Book?' Here, in summary, is the account he gave them of his findings: -

'Basically, I found five kinds of Christians. First, I found some who are Christian in name only. Even though they were baptised, they adhere to none of the observances of Christianity, and have no commitment to it. Secondly, I found some who are Christian by habit only. Even though they are committed to the outward observances, it doesn't affect the way they live. As far as I could see, they live according to principles that have nothing to do with the teachings of The Book, and in many cases are contrary to it. Thirdly, I found some who are clearly devoted to the Christian faith. They are

engaged in good works. Yet a vital element seems to be missing. They seem to possess few, if any, of the qualities which made their Master so appealing. Fourthly, I found some whom you might call practical Christians. It seemed to me that they have grasped the heart of what The Book is about. They are clearly concerned about other people, and are not ashamed to be seen to be Christians. In some places I saw them being persecuted. In other places I saw them meeting something which is probably worse – the deadly indifference of their fellow citizens. Lastly I met some, admittedly not many, whom I would have no hesitation in calling the genuine article. They are deeply spiritual people. In meeting them I felt I was meeting Christ himself.'

The story does not say whether or not those people accepted the Gospel as the good news of Jesus and put it into practice. But accepted or not, it stands as good news – good news from God and with the authority of God behind it. It is summed up today in the Vision Statement which is also his Mission Statement that Jesus makes in the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town. There, making his own a text from the prophet Isaiah, he presents himself as the Messiah called by God, filled with God's Spirit, and sent by God on this mission: - To be a missionary of God's love and agent of God's healing, wherever needed! To set people free from all kinds of evil, limits and handicaps!

The mission of Jesus then is also our mission now – yours and mine. To see how it is done today, just look to Pope Francis. He is passionately committed to poor and troubled persons in his own back yard, and further afield. He refused to live in the palace provided for him, but settled in two rooms of St Martha's Guest House. He regularly sends a bishop to give food and money to poor persons in substandard houses. He has provided showers and toilets in St Peter's Square for homeless people. Every now and then, he goes to prisons to comfort and encourage persons locked behind bars. The latest news despatch reports him dropping into a nursing home unannounced, to mix with the residents there, and going on from there to visit patients unannounced in a facility for the mentally ill.

If we are unable to do all the works of mercy our Pope is managing to accomplish, surely we can settle for at least one or two. Take, e.g. what Tracey, a school teacher in a state school, has been able to do with the grace of God. This is her story:

'One of the new girls in my class is hunched over and her shoulder blade sticks up in the air. The first couple of weeks she had difficulty coming to

school. Nobody would talk to her as she really looks “different” and, well, you know what kids can be like. They were never verbally unkind, they just didn’t include her in anything. I had meetings with her mother and the principal to try to remedy the situation but nothing worked. Eva, it seemed, was doomed to be an outsider. Then, an idea. There is a student in my class, Heather, who comes from a very poor economic background, has learning difficulties, but is very popular with everyone. I thought to myself: IF I CAN JUST GET HEATHER TO BEFRIEND EVA, WE MAY HAVE A CHANCE HERE. I put the challenge to Heather and she said: “No problem. I really like Eva.” I was really delighted by her response. I told her what a special person she was and how grateful I was for her support. The next thing I know Heather has worked her magic. These days Eva can’t wait to get to school. She came up and hugged me the other day and said: “Miss Ryan, I LOVE school!” It just goes to show how a little bit of kindness can change a child’s life.’

bgleesoncp@gmail.com

ⁱ As told by Fr Flor McCarthy SDB