

Dear friends

A friend once gave me an intriguing book – it was unlike anything I had ever read, unlike anything I went on to read after it and unlike anything I shall choose to read in the future. It was a collection of short writings/pieces – vignettes, snippets of life-scenes -, but all without a discernible theme or themes (which is why you could not call them stories!). It was an amusing read (I think I found it amusing!), but it left no impression. How could it? There was nothing to wrap your thoughts around,... .The only impression I *did* take away was how empty or irrelevant and utterly insipid a thing becomes when it is sanitised of a theme or any variation on a theme or when no theme is discernible.

And here's the thing I want to draw attention to: that the church has a theme, and one that is proper to it. A church found without its theme it is like Peter Pan's shadow when it is apart from its master. It is by its theme that the church's essence (=what it is) becomes recognisable and is really present.

If we liken the church to a piece of music, then its sound is that of changing variations on its theme: Some variations are powerful, exuberant, full of energy, others are quiet, slow, almost more like a lament; also they come in different keys, which adds yet more layers to the variety of the whole thing – but always the theme is discernible, and when it is not or no longer discernible, then the music is lost.

The church's theme is *mission*, specifically, as we saw over the past few Sundays, *God's mission through Jesus Christ*: God's mission to make good on his promise to help us in Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection and his ongoing presence as the exalted Lord. As Jesus said to his disciples after his resurrection (incidentally: for their forward planning!): *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."* (Jn.20,21-23) Or again: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Mt.28,18-20)

The church's theme is mission. And it is in the church's missionary activities, like variations on a theme, that the church is in tune with its theme. This theme must be discernible. I remember the words of a professor who made this point very succinctly, by saying: "A church that does not carry out its commission (= does not sound its theme) is effectively de-commissioning itself", echoing Jesus' warning about salt becoming saltless and therefore pointless.

What we are looking at here is a missionary activity of the early church. And we learn some vital clues about how the church's theme is carried on. Two things need to be highlighted, for the fact that both of them show what drives a church to remain true to its theme.

One is the place in it all of God's guidance and guiding. Paul's missionary activity in Macedonia is initiated by the vision sent to him in the night of a man who urges him with the words: "*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*" Paul confers with his friends and associates; there is a process of discerning, of owning the vision together and come to a conclusion about whether it is or is not God calling. This process, although it did not take long in that instance, will have involved prayer along with the recognition and belief that the Lord *does* guide his church.

There is always for all missionary activity of the church the initiating moment that is God's guidance and guiding. This is in the hands of God and in its working remains for the church a mystery – not to be disposed over but believed.

The church never initiates its missionary activity in any true sense but under the governance and guidance of the Lord. Does this mean, then, that the church depends on the experience of visions like that of Paul to initiate real missionary activity? The answer is no, and Paul himself shows this clearly. Often in the book of Acts the Lord's guidance is picked up and responded to through the very normal and unspectacular process of following the promptings of the heart by way of reasoning, discussing, thinking, planning etc. Sometimes also, as Paul attests in his letters, the Lord's guidance only appears in the frustration of the church's own plans, leading it into a period of waiting and repenting and seeking.

But although the church does not (ever or in any case) dispose over God's governance and guiding – so that it could

assume that what the church does God does, or claim God's guidance for anything it chooses to do -, what is necessary is for the church to be praying for guidance, which it will only do if it believes in the reality of such guidance and the need for it; what is necessary is for the church to discern the word of God in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, because God's mission is by his word; what is necessary is for the church to hear the call "Come and help us!" and to know that it is a call for the Gospel, the witness of Jesus Christ: a church that is ashamed of the Gospel has abandoned its theme and cannot help a world weighed down by sin and death (alienated from God).

The other thing to be highlighted with regard to the church's missionary activity appears in what is said of Lydia. Gathering by the river, presumably for prayer, a group of women were joined by Paul and his friends, who sat down and spoke to them. In the course of Paul's preaching, it is said of one of the women who heard, Lydia, that "*the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*" This woman came to faith and was baptised, even with all her household. But this is not just interesting, it reveals a deep truth at the heart of all missionary activity: that faith in Jesus – the goal of the church's missionary activity, the help the heart calls for – is God's work, is his doing, is by an act of divine revelation. Many heard, down by that river, but the heart needed opening in order to pay attention to the Gospel, for that is what Paul was speaking, to pay attention, that is, to Christ, the power and wisdom of God, to pay attention to Christ, the love of God and the fullness of life.

Paul was not at liberty to mould the message to suit the tastes and inclinations of those who would not receive the Gospel, nor indeed (!) the tastes and inclinations of those who he would have thought might receive it; nor to change or otherwise doctor the word of Christ. He was not at liberty; and neither is the church, unless it abandons its theme that is mission and faith.

Nor is it necessary. God reveals his word, opening the heart to its truth, where and when the Spirit wills, for it is a thing of grace and must be; only let there be his word, in faithfulness and obedience.

Dear friends, when we know, as we must, of the closedness of the heart to the things of God, we must pray for its opening and for the gift of the Holy Spirit, we must give it the food that is God's word and ask for the freedom to speak God's word boldly and clearly and to hear it humbly. And what we thus receive that we can then also give. So the church's missionary activities shall stay on its God-given theme.

**AMEN**