

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom,

27 September 2020, Alison Wedgbury. Readings: Revelation 21:1-7 and Psalm 82

In the last series of talks for Evening Prayer, Cheryl Lowe, Sarah Rossouw and I explored the Creeds, those wonderful declarations of Christian faith that people have used for centuries. In the current series on Mission, we've already heard evidence from the Bible about the Apostles and others, going out to tell people about Jesus. In Paul's letters and the book of Acts, we hear of groups in many cities calling themselves for the first time 'Christians'.

The next 200 years or so is a fascinating period. Official Christian doctrines were still being worked out, including the Creeds. People were not yet agreed on belief in the divine Trinity nor in Salvation through the Cross, i.e. that Jesus died for our sins. People didn't even have the same set of documents we know as the Bible. Much that we now take for granted, these early Christian women and men did not have. They did not yet have big church buildings. But they did go and live in what they thought of as the 'ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). What these new Christians took with them was the unique message of the Resurrection of Jesus. They spoke of a new heaven and a new earth as in our reading tonight from Revelation.

There is documentary evidence that by about the year 300 Christians were to be found in the countries we now know as Algeria, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Georgia, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kurdistan, Portugal, Spain, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Yemen. Some in very small numbers in villages, more in large cities. How was this possible? Historians of Christianity say it was due to 3 main factors: the enormous Greek and Roman Empires, widespread, well established Jewish communities and lastly a common language, mostly Greek, for administration, trade and daily life. Surprisingly, it was relatively safe to travel around the Roman Empire. Military and trade routes were protected. It's true there were persecutions of Christians, but not all the time. Jews knew their own Scriptures well and so many would quickly understand the teachings of Jesus. Note how Paul always went a synagogue first when he arrived in a new city. But mostly it was because these new Christians lived out the love of God for fellow human beings in new ways, usually very different from other local religions. People were changed, literally beyond belief. They realised that their old 'pagan' gods did not give them what following Jesus could. They were impressed by how the early Christians shared resources, looked after the poor, organised burials with respect and cared for others not just their own families. They also went beyond the big cities, into rural communities. They lived with the knowledge of a new heaven and a new earth.

So what about now, in our own 'known world'? Like those early Christians, we have wonderful opportunities to share the good news in local contexts. Nearly all of us are involved in some way with activities other than church. We have words to speak about Jesus and God's love, everyday language. We don't have to use specialist jargon, Latin or Greek. We know our own communities and workplaces well. We can and do look after the sick, the poor, orphans and widows. We share our resources for the good of everyone, not just church people and our own families. So yes, we 'do mission' here and now. We are not just a nice private club on Sundays. In the current Covid19 restrictions we are doing even more outside the church building. We are contacting, visiting, helping, praying, loving others in the same ways that the early Christians did. We can't travel very much abroad or even in the UK this year, but we can reach every part of our own known world both in person and online. And we do, secure in the knowledge of God's love, the hope of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That is mission, whether or not we've ever been to Uzbekistan or Yemen.