

We're in it Together ...

... Keep Going!

A sermon given on the Eighteenth Sunday of Trinity, 8th October 2023 by the Rt Revd Nick Drayson, former Bishop of Northern Argentina and former Primate of the Anglican Church of South America, in Beverley Minster

Phillipians 1:3-5; Matthew 28: 18-20; Isaiah 43:10

Let us pray as we stand:

Father, what we know not, teach us; what we have not, give us; and what we are not, make us, for Christ's sake. Amen. Please be seated.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, it's a great joy to be back in the Minster after many years. For those of you who don't know myself and my wife Catherine, who's also here, I was Associate Vicar here in the first nine years of this millennium. And in 2009, the Lord called us to go overseas to South America, where I was bishop for the last 14 years in Northern Argentina and also with some responsibility in neighbouring republics in South America. And during that time, many churches and individuals have supported us faithfully in prayer and giving and correspondence and in all sorts of meaningful ways, including the Minster and St Leonard's and Tickton and Woodmansey.

And it's great to be back, to sort of report back and say, "Well, we've now retired." Our time came to an end when I turned 70 in May and so now it's our task to visit a number of these supporting churches and fellowships who've who've made it all possible, because we've certainly not felt on our own although it has been quite lonely at times (it's a very demanding ministry) but we're in it together. And I think that's really what I wanted to share this morning as we come to an end of our time with the Church Missionary Society - we're doing the rounds, reporting back and saying, "God has been faithful. Thank you. And keep going!" Because mission doesn't finish just because we come back from the mission field - World Mission is there for us all to be involved with. So forgive me if I don't preach on today's reading, but I wanted to share three verses with you which have meant a lot to us over this time overseas, and perhaps encourage you to, as I say, continue to partner and be involved with what God is doing worldwide, because that's what he calls us to do.

So I'll talk a little bit about what we've been doing. I know a number of you receive our letters and occasional videos and so on. So at the risk of repeating ourselves, I'd just like to say we've been in the privileged position of being missionaries but also being church leaders in Latin America. But the time had come for the Latin American Church to have its

own leadership and not depend on missionaries and foreigners so one of the major aspects of my ministry both in the diocese of Northern Argentina and also in the province of South America, has been to prepare national leadership - one of my greatest feelings of satisfaction is to leave South America with all of the leadership being South American and me being the last English bishop. And having said that, it's been a privilege to work as part of a team, as part of a shared ministry with folk from different cultures.

God moves us about! The ideal in our minds in many ways is to have a fully national indigenous church, a fully national indigenous leadership. But if you look at the Bible, you see that God moved his people around. And that's what I think Paul is referring to in the letter to the Philippians, chapter one, verse five, when he thanks God for their partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now. He says chapter one, verse three, *"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now. I'm confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."* And you will remember that Paul was shown by God in a dream that he had to go to Europe - that's how the gospel reached Europe. He believed that God was speaking through the dream. The next morning, he and Luke got the boat over to Troas and they were in Europe and that's how the Gospel reached Europe. And he refers to 'your partnership in the Gospel.' Who was he talking to? Well, we know three of them from the Book of Acts, chapter 16. There was Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, a prominent businesswoman from Asia Minor, and she opened her home and Paul went and prayed and taught there along the riverside with the gathering of God-fearing people who met there - so he partnered with her; he needed her participation as well; she wasn't just on the receiving end. Similarly, there was the demon-possessed girl who was making a lot of money for her owners because she had a demon who could prophesy and Paul cast out that demon and left these men without their business. So Paul and Silas were thrown in prison - but, the girl was set free, so she also had a partnership in what God was doing in bringing the Gospel to Europe. And thirdly of course, very well known, is the jailer: Paul and Silas were in the prison and there was an earthquake as they sang hymns in the darkness at night and the soldier was on the point of killing himself because he thought he was going to lose all his prisoners. Paul calmed him down, told him how to be saved and went to his house and baptised him and all his household. These are the people Paul is talking to as he mentions partnership. He says 'Thank you for your partnership in the Gospel.' You would have thought in some ways Paul would have all the press, all the glory, because he was the one who was brave enough to go and preach, but these three people and many more also 'partnered'. And I think that's one of the things we've learnt over the

years, that you have to work in a team: it's not just the vicar or the bishop or the pastoral team who are the people doing the work; we all have a part in what God's calling us to do; we're called to be partners because the Gospel is for everybody; and probably, your friends and family are going to hear the Gospel through you and the way you share your life with them.

So over these last 14 years and in many ways before that, both here and where we were working in other places, we've been very conscious of working in teams and working in partnership, sometimes across cultural barriers. In the diocese where I was bishop, the vast majority of the churches and church members were indigenous tribal people, very poor, with their own culture which was largely side-lined in Argentine society. And then there was a smaller number of churches with European descendants, Spanish-speaking believers, and traditionally they didn't have anything in common at all; there was enmity really, and sometimes between the indigenous tribes as well. And one of the things the Gospel brought was peace and agreement up to a certain point between different racial groups and tribal groups. And so that has produced a partnership. If we had some pictures to show you, you'd see a number of pictures of people from different cultures, and one particularly I'm thinking of - Bolivia, which is a tiny diocese, very, very few churches. They have a Bolivian bishop now, but when we first went out to South America, the bishop was American. And then when we were working there, a missionary came from Singapore, they had an Asian bishop and now they have a Bolivian bishop. And I have a lovely picture of the three of us together, showing the partnership that we're called to. And one of the things we've noticed as we travel around as bishops is that you can often measure the health of a church by its willingness to partner in World Mission, its willingness to give. You look at the finances, how much is being given to World Mission. I believe Beverley Minster used to (I hope still does) look at the giving and say, 'this proportion will go to our work overseas or to partner in mission.' It's a very practical way and I believe as individuals as well, a lot can be said about us by what we do with our giving, because we're called to a giving partnership.

So that's the first thing I wanted to say, that we're in this together, it's us and you, it's us and them. It's partnering with other organisations. We've worked closely with Bible Society, with Mother's Union, with the Alpha Course, all sorts of international organisations. And this has produced a wonderful mix of fruit for the Gospel.

At the same time, we're involved in sharing in discipleship. One of the things we've learned over the years as we've looked at intentional discipleship is that church is not just about gleaning information, coming and learning a few things, then going home. It's about

learning from one another and about not just information but imitation. And we should be available to allow others to imitate us and to imitate them and then allow innovation in the culture where we are. So that's the first verse I wanted to share.

The second one is just over the page from today's reading in Matthew 28 - you probably know this one because it's usually what people preach about when they think about World Mission - Jesus's last words on earth saying, *"All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you. Remember, I'm with you always, even to the end of the age."*

And the verse I wanted to draw out there is '*disciples of all nations.*' The command is not just to preach, not just to teach, not just to baptise - these are means to an end. But our aim, our call as God's people, is to make disciples. So going global, being actively part of God's worldwide church is about making disciples of all nations. And Mark's Gospel talks about preaching the gospel to all creation.

And I think it's not just a trend, but I think it's a helpful movement that's going on worldwide: to realise that this planet is our common home; we can't really be an island; because the way we live affects the climate; it affects the planet in all sorts of small and large ways. The majority of the area we worked in was forest, but the forest is being cut down and the people who live in the forest and who live from hunting, fishing and so on have their livelihood threatened. So it's not just the climate and the environment that's threatened, but also people and social justice.

So the world we live in is all one, it's a common home. The well-known document by Pope Francis '*Laudato Si*' talks about sharing this planet and that can be applied as we look at not just the environment, but world mission generally - the fact of a common home, that what we do here affects what we do overseas; what we do overseas affects what we do here; we're all linked up to one another. And that is what God calls us to be as his disciples and as disciple makers. But it may be one by one, it may be small groups, but it's part of a much bigger picture, and this is the nature of the church.

I suspect you're familiar with the five marks of mission. Forgive me if you are, but I'm just going to repeat quickly a sort of checklist of how the church and how our lives are doing as disciples and as disciple makers. There are five marks that denote the mission of the church:

- Firstly, to proclaim, to preach the gospel.
- Secondly, to teach, to make disciples, to nurture.

- Thirdly, to tend to care for the sick, to serve the poor and outcast.
- Fourthly, to transform unjust structures, to be involved in fighting injustice.
- And fifthly, to treasure creation, to care for God's world.

These are five areas that we should all be involved with at a local and a global level, because they're things that matter to God. I think one of the best ways of looking at 'creation care' is that we care for creation because God loves it, and similarly we care for justice because God loves it. And so we're seeking God's heart as we seek to make disciples, loving what God loves.

So giving partnerships, going global, and thirdly, growing witnesses. Isaiah 43, verse ten, *"You are my witnesses,"* says the Lord, *"and my servant whom I've chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he."* We often quote that verse where Jesus says, *"When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* And we tend to think in terms of witnesses talking to others, but the role of the witness, according to Isaiah is that we may **know God**: it's our privilege to go to the ends of the earth so that we may know God; see Him at work; allow what he's doing to inform our lives, our service and our relationships. And so I would call this 'growing witnesses' - as witnesses, we grow because we know God better and we're invited to know God, what he's like and what he does. One of my abiding memories of South America is as we left, we looked out on a sea of newly ordained deacons. That might not seem terribly interesting or impressive but it was very satisfying because during COVID, almost 100 of our leaders in the church died - not all from COVID, but we suddenly lost a whole generation - and not just elderly ones. And the church took the decision to go for ordination, go for local training in a big way. And about 110 men and women were ordained during my last couple of years in South America, all by the local bishops because I wasn't doing this on my own. This was the indigenous bishops who took this decision and are now training. Many of these men and women don't have much formal training, but they're doing it on the job and learning about God as they go along, not at college, but in the church, in the community. And so we've looked at new leaders.

Similarly, one of the things Catherine was involved in in a big way was Amare, similar to Mother's Union but in South America, training families to disciple their own children and take the family and the children seriously and training women to stand up and be counted. So we've been privileged to see, to witness, what God is doing. And as part of God's ongoing mission worldwide, we are growing witnesses.

And so, in all of this, to continue to support mission worldwide is what I would encourage you as a church, as individuals, to do. Maybe the church has a list of missionaries or partners that people are invited to pray for; you may know people yourself; you may want to look at the different missionary organisations or movements going on; who can I pray for? Who can I be involved with going forward?

We are so grateful, as I say, for the support we've received. And in a sense, as we draw to a close now and say 'Thank you', we would also say, 'Please continue to pray for the people we've been working with, but also for others.' Because that is the way the gospel is going to continue to be shared as partners, as disciple makers, and as witnesses. living and sharing a Jesus-shaped life. So thank you once again for your prayers.

Do continue to pray for us. You may have heard I've retired now and we've relocated, so two big moves. I was also quite seriously ill earlier in the year and still a bit shaky: I say to people, "I'm in the repair shop." So your prayers are appreciated for complete recovery and for guidance as to what we should be doing next. But our greetings to you from your brothers and sisters in South America. Please continue to pray for them and be involved in what God is doing worldwide.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for involving us in your mission of love.

Thank you that you've given to each of us a calling and many gifts and that you love us.

And we thank you, Lord, that we're not an island in your church - we are part of the same family with millions of others, some that we know well and others not at all.

And we pray, Lord, that you will guide and help us as individuals and as a church, as we consider and pray about how we should focus our efforts and our giving in partnership with you and others.

Reading Texts

Philippians 1:3-5

³ *I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Isaiah 43:10

¹⁰ *You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.*