

## **Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year ABC commemorating St Mungo/Kentigern**

Isaiah 52:7-10, 1 Thessalonians 2:2-12, Matthew 28:16-20

I am sure you noticed that all our readings are about proclaiming the gospel, including our gospel passage with Jesus's Great Commission: go and make disciples of all nations.

And there's a good reason for this because today we are commemorating the Patronal Festival of St Mungo, or St Kentigern to give him his proper name, which was actually on Friday, the anniversary of his death in 614 (or possibly 603).

St Mungo began missionary work in Strathclyde at the age of 25. He founded the church which is now the Scottish Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow and the city of Glasgow itself. And young as he was, he had a passion for preaching the gospel and to see people come to faith in Jesus.

In fact, Kentigern started proclaiming the gospel before he reached 25. He was born illegitimately in Fife and taken in and raised by Saint Serf, who had himself come to Fife as a missionary, and who then trained Kentigern to be a priest.

And it was Saint Serf who gave him the name Mungo, an affectionate term meaning 'dear one'.

Of course, Mungo had to travel from Fife to get to Strathclyde and it is thought he went by way of the Pentlands. Which is probably why, if you Google St Mungo churches in Scotland, a small swathe of churches across the lower central belt of Scotland pop up, including us, Trinity Congregational Church in Penicuik (which used to be St Mungo's) and St Mungo's Balerno, among others.

And it is because St Mungo was an evangelist and church founder that the readings for his feast day are about proclaiming the gospel. Which brings us back to The Great Commission.

These words of Jesus in Matthew 28 are so familiar I wonder if they wash over us without us really registering them, even though we may well be able to quote them verbatim.

In fact, do we actually consider that they apply to us? After all, as far as I know, none of us have been, or are about to be, overseas missionaries per se. But, of course, all the world includes our next-door neighbours, not just those overseas.

So, let's spend a few moments looking, not at the Great Commission itself, but at our epistle reading. You might find it helpful to have a Bible open at 1 Thessalonians 2, page 1186 of the church bibles.

I dare say that St Mungo didn't have a particularly comfortable time travelling through the Pentlands in the 6th century, possibly along the Roman Road, preaching the gospel. But I'm sure that it was nothing like the experience Paul had which he refers to in verse 2. In Philippi he was flogged, thrown in jail, and put into the stocks, all without a trial. And even when Paul was released and went to Thessalonica he met further opposition, narrowly escaped arrest, and had to flee the city in dead of night.

Nevertheless, Paul says he dared to tell the Thessalonians the gospel. It was an imperative for him. And it obviously bore fruit because here he is writing to the church in Thessalonica.

So let us consider three "M"s of Paul's gospel proclamation in our epistle.

### **Paul's Manner**

First, he is persistent and undeterred by opposition. Which makes me wonder, whether we are more likely to put off proclaiming the gospel, even from volunteering that we are Christians or go to church because we fear opposition, snide remarks or being belittled for believing.

I was challenged some years ago when I was asked "When someone wants to know what you did at the weekend, do you ever say that you went to church? Or do you talk about anything but?" May it not be so.

Secondly, Paul's manner in preaching the gospel was without trickery or flattery; he was not seeking personal adulation or praise – or financial gain – nor was he domineering or bossy. He was like a child.

Now what might spring to mind here are some of the USA tele-evangelists who preach what people want to hear, promise prosperity, and ask for money.

But before we point the finger at them, we need to take a look at ourselves. Not that we are after money, but maybe approval or acceptance.

Is our presentation of the gospel more of a cosy comfort blanket to please our hearers omitting the rough edges that lead us, ourselves, to confess our sins week by week? Do we actually mention repentance in order to call people into God's kingdom and glory as in verse 12?

And could we say, with Paul "you can trust me, you know how holy, righteous and blameless I am."

Now, that's some claim! Is that what people see in us?

Our second "M" is:

### **Paul's Motivation**

Paul cites two motivations in this passage.

First, he has been entrusted by God with the gospel. So, his aim is to please God, not people, in sharing it. He is aware that God tests hearts, so he doesn't want to be found lacking. God is our witness. I wonder if we ever think of that when we talk with someone else about our faith. Jesus is watching.

But aiming to please God, knowing that he is watching, is not Paul's primary motivation for preaching.

His primary motivation is love. Paul loves people so much that he is delighted not only to share the gospel with them but his life as well, not in a way that exploits them or expects them to beholden to him but in a way that enhances their lives and his ministry. Paul genuinely cared for the people to whom he was ministering. Despite opposition and hardship, it was Paul's pleasure to share the gospel.

Now I think it is genuinely hard to love people as Paul seems to have done. I have a non-Christian son-in-law of whom I'm very fond and for whom I pray often. It tears me apart to think that he may be missing from our family gathering in the new heaven and new earth. I hate to think of my Christian daughter's tears in that scenario.

But shouldn't I have similar concerns for my next-door neighbour? A different sort of love, perhaps, but still love. Do I genuinely care for them like a nursing mother? I pray that it may be so.

And our third "M" is method

### **Paul's Methods**

Here again we have two aspects. First Paul works really hard, night and day, in order not to be a burden and discouragement to the Thessalonians.

He describes toil and hardship. Again, I wonder, how much time and effort are we prepared to put in to sharing the gospel with others? Maybe we don't have to make tents to free ourselves to proclaim the gospel but are there other ways, perhaps creative ways, we could employ?

Secondly Paul's method is like that of a father who is gently encouraging and comforting in urging others to live lives worthy of God. Paul presents the call of God into God's kingdom and glory rather than pointing out failure and shortcomings.

There is one other aspect of Paul's account that I have ignored so far but which we do well to consider. Throughout our epistle Paul does not say "I" but "we". Paul has a partner in his missionary endeavour, in this case Silas. So perhaps we should ask ourselves whether there is anyone that we should partner with in our presentation of the gospel?

We don't know if St Mungo had a companion in his missionary journeys. But as we think today of his motivation and way of life, proclaiming the gospel and founding Christian communities, not only in Scotland but also in Cumbria and Wales, let us consider our own lives.

Are we equally keen to respond to Jesus's Great Commission? Are we out to please God, aware that "Jesus is watching", or to please ourselves? Are we willing to spend our lives in sharing the gospel with others? And, if so, do we genuinely love our neighbour as ourselves? Amen

Chris Shaw, 15 January 2023