

Obedient, Presumptuously Humble and Vulnerable: Evangelism for Episcopalians

2015 Harvey Lecture
Seminary of the Southwest, Austin TX
March 23, 2015

Rt Rev James Tengtenga, PhD

Introduction

On one fateful day I received an email some of whose contents read:

We rarely speak of or hear about evangelism. "Evangelism" is sometimes regarded as a bad word in the Episcopal Church. It seems that many of us in the seminary community are afraid to engage in evangelism or even talk about it, for fear of "stepping on someone's toes." Given the countless Gospel imperatives to share the Good News, this is clearly a serious problem, especially in our increasingly secularized world. Knowing that you have expressed a strong commitment to evangelism in your ministry, we would be delighted if you would share with our community a vision of how we might faithfully "do the work of an evangelist" in the 21st century.

That was the assignment I was given by your committee. I somehow have to sanitize Evangelism and make it Episcopalian friendly! The ego stroking in the invitation was not lost on me! Thank you. Besides, not so long ago a fellow alum and classmate of mine said that she does not remember anyone who spoke about evangelism the way I did over thirty years ago! The truth about that was that I was just "in-your-face" about my faith. Sanitize, Episcopalian, Ego and in-your-face are some of the words I just used which I believe have something to do with Evangelism. So how might I do what you asked?

Evangelism for me is an ego trip of a special kind. I hope you get the multiple entendre play on "ego" here. Just in case you did not, I refer you to the Johannine "ἐγὼ ἡμῖν" passages. Jesus says, "Just as the Father sent me so send I you". [Once you get on to the word play you are also led to the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) which further conjures the occasion for the revelation of God's name to Moses in Exodus 3. God's self revelation which ends with the sending of Moses to reveal God to God's people and to Pharaoh. The Tetragrammaton is also the verb 'to be': reminiscent of the Johannine "The one who was, is and is to come". Now "to be" is to exist, to live, to be alive, and reminiscent of Irenaeus who says that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive" that is to say the glory of God is a human being who fully is. So Moses is the sent one. This in turn gives us another related Hebrew word: *Sholeah*. One who is sent. And *sholeah* is related to prophet (*Nabi*, and the Greek, *prophetes*). It thus brings us full circle to an apostle (*apostello*): one who is sent. But this is another track we can follow in talking about Evangelism which we do not have time for today!] Any way, one does it because one is obedient to the one who sent them. It is the very nature of the Gospel that it is communicable. It refuses to be under a bushel basket and like a city on a hill it cannot be hidden. It cries out to be communicated. Once one is a Christian, they have no choice but to be an evangelist. Besides you carry the same commission as the one Jesus himself had from the father! More than an affinity with Christ. More like an identity! You are in Christ and Christ is in you. You are marked as Christ's own to be sent. You are marked as Christ's own at baptism and charged not to be ashamed of preaching Christ crucified. Jesus Christ was the Word made flesh; the embodiment of the Gospel. He was the message and the messenger all in one. The evangelist is called to be that too! Following the disciples you are also charged to go into all the world and make disciples, teaching and baptising.

It's not about you inasmuch as it has to do with you! It is personal. You communicate yourself and in so doing communicate Christ. St Paul says, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ". There is a presumptuous identification with Christ in being an evangelist. One is sent by Christ in the same way that Christ was sent by the Father. To that extent then I would say that one does Evangelism as one who

is Obedient, Vulnerable, with some Presumptuous Humility and no fear of Taint. Presumptuous humility? That's an oxymoron for you! It is a kenotic experience and undertaking. More anon.

Evangelism

In thinking and talking about Evangelism there are three related words which tend to be used often and thought to be interchangeable even though they should not be. These are Mission, Proselytism and Evangelism .

Evangelism is not Mission

There was a time in the Church of England when it was common to talk about a revival event at the parish as a Mission. This was an event for revival and bringing new members to the church. In reality when one saw what was happening one was looking at an evangelistic crusade or "tent meeting". A kind of Back-to-Church weekend or every-member-Sunday type of event. Evangelism is not mission. It is but one aspect of mission. Mission is God's agenda for and on behalf of the broken world. Mission includes evangelism but goes further into discipleship, stewardship, justice, peace, reconciliation and the integrity of creation. In mission, God "is at work to will and to do God's good pleasure". In evangelism we are enlisted into sharing with others the Good News of God's work and salvific love. This in no way suggests that God is not at work in Evangelism. God is! But we are specifically sent to share and to bear witness to God's activity. That is our task and not God's! As Anglicans we understand this activity as the first in our catalogue of the five marks of mission: *Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God*. In that case, then, we see it as the first and primary task of our participation in the *Missio Dei*. Evangelism is, thus, not mission but part of the heart of mission.

Evangelism is not Proselytism

Proselytism is a bad "P" word. In fact this is what gives evangelism the bad press. I find it unacceptable in today's multi-faith and ecumenical context.

In many ways it is very close to evangelism as it means bringing people in, converting them from something else to one's side and in this case, God's side! This in itself does not sound that bad. However, in this day and age when we are in a multi-faith context it smacks of a superiority complex. It is suggestive of aggression than of persuasion. More often than not, it is not an invitation into the kingdom of God but into "our" church. It tends to disregard the fact that the other has some knowledge of God and as such has a sense of the Gospel, albeit different (and possibly erroneous!). The claims of the Christian Gospel, as I understand them, are that the Gospel of Christ has an extra dimension that the other does not have but would be attracted to. This is what I hear exemplified by St Paul in his witness in the Areopagus (Acts 17) not to mention in Romans 1 and 2. Proselytism nullifies the other and treats their knowledge and experience as not (and if it is anything at all, as irrelevant) while evangelism complements. It says that there is more (that more which is better!): a quality/value addition you might say. It is, therefore, suggestive of a teleological fulfilment rather dismissive arrogance. There is a humility that belies the apparent assertiveness and hubris of evangelism which is absent in proselytism.

Proselytism raises issues about our ecumenical stance. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, it has raised problems in Russia with the advent of the new Christian movements and denominations coming into Russia with an attitude that denigrates the Russian Orthodox Church. The tendency is that of sheep stealing from one Christian denomination to another. This is suggestive of the denial of "churchness" and thus Christianity of the other and so creating competition instead of winning souls for Christ. Evangelism as proselytism becomes more of a recycling exercise than it is about new conversion to Christ. It turns the "Go into all the world..." into "Go into all the other churches that are not of your denomination..."! This is akin to the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church stance vis a vis other denominations. It also ignores the reality of the ecumenical conundrum which faced the missionaries of the late nineteenth century leading on to the 1910 Edinburgh Conference. The missionaries of that era recognized the scandal of a divided Christian witness. They even tried to resolve it by entering into comity agreements that divided up the mission field into denominational

enclaves which gave the appearance of an undivided gospel. They recognized church in each other even in their dividedness and wanted resolution to the conundrum. The ecumenical movement, as we know it, was born from that desire not only to be one as Jesus Christ had prayed for, but also for the unity and thus purity of the Gospel. "You cannot preach a divided Christ" is what they realized in line with St Paul's message to the Corinthian Church. Proselytism is suggestive of a divided Christ, a divided Gospel and thus anti-evangelism. The Rev Dr Carlos Ham (WCC Program Executive for Evangelism) addressing the Inter-Anglican Provincial Mission and Evangelism Coordinators Consultation in Nairobi, Kenya in 2002, observed that,

Proselytism is a perversion of authentic Christian Witness and thus a counter witness. It does not build up but destroys. It brings about tensions, scandal, division, and is thus a destabilizing factor for the witness of the church of Christ in the world. It is always a wounding of koinonia, creating not fellowship but antagonistic parties.

This is precisely because proselytism is church centered instead of being Christ centered and Kingdom centered. To put it differently it is all about the institutional church. This is what is wrong when evangelism is all about church growth. Nothing wrong with church growth per se, but that it tends to make everything into a game of numbers, size and competitive church planting. It is obsessed with results and counting heads with less regard for the kingdom and unity imperative. In that sense it is competitive against other parishes, dioceses and denominations. It is all about church and not much about God and God's Kingdom.

Related to this competitiveness is the recovery of the concept of what is known as "power evangelism". Some of you may remember or may have heard of John Wimber and the Vineyard movement. I am not trying to knock this movement but simply using it as an illustration of this "signs and wonders" aspect of evangelism as it relates to proselytism. Indeed Jesus Christ and the Apostles demonstrated the power of their message by healings and other miracles. My understanding of that

was that the signs and wonders were not an end in themselves but a demonstration of the good news of the kingdom of God. They were not a means to show that one apostle was superior to another. As St Paul would say, "The gifts of the Spirit are not for boasting but for the edification of the body of Christ." It was not showmanship and one-upmanship as seems to be prevalent today. Our experience in Malawi is that this has become the popular gospel. The so-called evangelists do not even preach at all but all they do is perform miracles. Kerygma is replaced by spectacle! This is also used as a way of demonstrating that denominations like ours are devoid of Holy Spirit and thus not true church. Competition and sheep stealing seems to be the aim. People are invited to the miracles and not to Christ. More often than not, it is an invitation to the personality of the evangelist than to Christ. These "Men of God" (as they are called) become more important than God. People follow the man. So not only are we looking at competitive proselytism but at personality cults. Some of these personalities have been unmasked as frauds.

Where it is not personalities it is non-denominational churches. They come mainly from the USA (with a few homegrown copycats) claiming to be non-denominational and thus interested only in the proclamation of the gospel. Before long they become the oxymoronic "non-denominational denomination"! It is the Russian scenario, referred to above, played out differently. It becomes about the non-denominational denomination and much less about the kingdom of God.

This has a tendency to give credence to the point about proselytism being counter Gospel. The unmasking of the charlatans and the deception in this superstardom complex has the potential of turning converts and observers into cynics and unbelievers as they get to think that all evangelism is fraudulent and so lose faith. Evangelism is meant to increase faith and not destroy it. This is more so as this proselytism creates mistrust of mainline denominations among people who having lost faith in the mainline churches get to lose faith in the power evangelists as well. That in my view will usher in secularism in Africa in a big way. Should this be, Jesus' question will become all too real: "Will the Son of

Man find faith when he comes?" Evangelism is about increasing faith as well as the faithful.

Evangelism is...

I have spent some time on what evangelism is not. Dr Emilio Castro, a former Secretary General of the WCC once said,

Evangelism aims not to satisfy people, but to transform people, we are not calling them to be happy with what they are, we are calling them and ourselves to aim at the promise of abundant life, that is the life under the Cross that Jesus has called us for. (as quoted by Ham).

So what does evangelism look like and how might we as Anglicans/Episcopalians do it?

It is an invitation to Jesus Christ and not necessarily to church. It is the life of Christ and our life in him that we share with others when we engage in evangelism. As such it is neither hearsay nor gossip. One has to have experienced the transforming power of the Savior to want to share it. As St John (1 John 1:1-4) would say,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed and we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you the eternal life that was with the father and was revealed to us...

I still remember one song Born-again-Christians used to sing when I was in high school:

It only takes a spark to get the fire burning...
That's how it is with God's love
Once you have experienced it...

You want to pass it on.

Nothing new here. It seems to me that Americans love to share experiences about their vacations and their favourite or newest restaurant in town, even with strangers! It comes natural. If Jesus is the biggest news in your life, it should come natural that you share him too! You do not need to be a Baptist, Jehovah's Witness or Mormon to go about talking about Jesus and your faith. Somehow Episcopalians have ceded evangelism to others. "We are about worship and order, and social justice (sometimes!)", we say to ourselves and others. However, our baptism says otherwise! I appreciate that some of this needs special skills but that too, is really a new phenomenon and a cop out. One needs no skill to tell another what they have found or experienced. I suppose that this is the reason Organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ and Sojourners came up with the *Four Spiritual Laws* to help those who need something to hold onto to do what Christ has gotten hold of them to do.

If one is in Christ it should follow that they would want to share the good news in Christ. Now let me put it another way, when one is in Christ, Jesus shines through them. It is already out there and if it's not, you need to begin to wonder why? Our life as Christians has a way of showing and when it does, we more often than not find ourselves having to explain why we are so different. If I were to be a little crude I would say that the Jesus in me is like that stubborn lace that refuses to stay under a woman's skirt! It will be noticed and the one who notices will take a second look! More often than not, we balk at that. This is where most of us Episcopalians lose our nerve. We become self conscious and coy. "You do not have to be coy Roy! Just let your mouth go! and you will be surprised at what comes out!" This is where my presumptuousness comes through. I am in Christ and Christ is in me. I have been marked as Christ's own at baptism. At my baptism (and/or Confirmation) I pledged not to be ashamed to proclaim Christ. Jesus has sent me with the authority of God! I am not a servant but a friend of Christ. I dare to be like Christ who did the father's bidding. I see the world the way God sees it! St Paul tells us that in 2 Corinthians 5. St Paul is also the one who tells the Romans that he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for it is

the power of God for salvation and further on in that letter, says that his desire is that all should be saved. There is nothing showy about this if our faith is real. It shows on its own. All we need to do is tell others what it is all about. We may even take it a notch further. St Paul was known to invite others to imitate him as he was an imitator of Christ. It would not be out of place for us to say the same. People see it anyway, all the time! Our being and how we comport ourselves invites or repels people from Christ.

Of course there is always the fear of being misinterpreted. Another related worry is figuring out what to say and how much. If it is honest sharing about your experience in Jesus you will have something to say in the context. I am not talking about speaking out of context. One listens as one speaks and speaks as one listens. Personal evangelism is context driven and flows from the conversation. It is thus not prepackaged. It is not judgmental since one talks not of another but of oneself in Christ and so not accusatory. This is where vulnerability comes into play. There is always the possibility of being rejected. Well, it's not about us! If anyone is rejected it is Christ and not you. Jesus even said to the disciples that if people rejected him, what more with the disciples! Nothing new here, either! Besides it is not your job to convert. Leave that to the Holy Spirit.

Our responsibility as Christians is to share the good news and not to convert. For me then, Evangelism is not aimed at conversion. It is about sharing Christ and our experience in him by the power of the Holy Spirit. Conversion happens as God works his ways with God's people. It does not need to be on the spot: it may even be years later at a very different place listening to someone else! Results are not the end. Obedience to the one who sent me is all for me. That explains my in-your-faceness and whence cometh my temerity!

One other thing about evangelism and results. I have always been inspired by the account of the sending of the disciples in twos in Luke chapter 10. This is where Jesus talks about the laborers being few. More often than not, we read it as though he is talking about the work of planting and growing even when the

passage is explicit that it is about harvesting. He says that the harvest is ready and what is needed are harvesters. Those are the laborers he is talking about. It says that they, and by extension us, do not have to worry about the work of conversion. Ours is to bring in the harvest! In this then, evangelism is not about planting the seed or cultivation. It's about picking the spoils. God has done the work!

What I have been saying so far begs the question of the location of this work. Personal evangelism or witnessing as it is sometimes called, happens any place and at any time: in the bus, in the bar, in the park, in the gym etc. There is a spontaneity about it. It is also to anyone and everyone. That is a scary prospect even in the best of contexts. This is where I believe the Pauline principle of being all things to all people applies. There is always the danger of being identified with the people you are with or witnessing to. This, more so, if the context is one that is fraught with possible misinterpretations. But is that not what kenosis is about? Isn't this what the Incarnation was all about: identification without contamination. The personal evangelist blends in with no assume airs; always aware that we carry the gospel in earthen vessels. We heard of the concept of "taint" in the Church of England with the recent ordination of the first female bishop. If we have the "mind that was in Christ" (Phil 2:5) we would do as he says and not be tainted by the context we are in. Jesus and the Woman at the well, in John 4, is another biblical example of the taint question in context. Jesus was not tainted by the woman! Taint is not only through contamination by the sinners but also through identification with the wrong sort of Christians and evangelists. The latter is usually what Episcopalians fear most.

Beyond the personal we have to consider the whole body of Christ. That which Christ requires of the individual, he requires of the community of faith. Evangelism is not the monopoly of those other denominations and Jesus freaks. Just like the disciples of old we are that city on a hill that cannot be hidden, that salt of the earth that is a condiment to the world and indeed the light that cannot be put under the bushel basket. Our churches and other worship spaces are great and they need to be filled with God's people. But God's people tend to be a

stubborn lot that loves their children's soccer practice more than church. The church that does not go out of its buildings and engage in evangelism and does not spend money on it will atrophy. A Church that will not expect its people to go out into the highways and byways is pathetically narcissistic and will die. As someone once said, "A church that lives to itself will die to itself!"

I grew up in a place where the Salvation Army marched all over the city and preached everywhere. It was a place where Methodists marched to open spaces in the middle of the township and preached in the open air. There was no shame in donning the Salvation Army uniform and invite people to Christ. There was no shame in singing, dancing and preaching the Gospel at a Methodist rally. The Jehovah's Witnesses did their thing as usual. The Baptists had regular revival crusades. Anglicans would go out of their buildings only during major feasts; usually a small procession round their church building. The Way of the Cross on Good Friday was the biggie. This is the only time I can recall going out into where the people are, in witness.

Later, when I became a priest I was not satisfied with this way of being for the church. We are called to go into the byways and highways too. It is not just for those others. Doing it is not simply joining the bandwagon or being a copycat. It is obedience to the Lord of the harvest. We were not joining in to compete either. In city wide Crusades we joined with other denominations. We trained our teams together. The point was not to gain members even though that was a lovely byproduct (thank you!). It was obedience to the call of Jesus Christ to bear witness to his saving power. We trained counsellors together. The counsellors were trained to meet with those who would make a commitment to Christ at the crusades and rallies and help them in their walk with Christ and walk beside them as they made choices of churches to join. As the late Festo Kivengere (a Ugandan bishop and evangelist) used to say, "When the Spirit moves, you move too!" We, thus, saw evangelism not simply as a numbers game or simply an expansion tool. It was an ecumenical response to the call of our One Lord and Savior. Each one of us individually could only cover so much ground but together we covered the city and all stood to gain not only in numbers but also in fellowship. Because it

required us to work and plan together it spawned other ways in which we cooperated in service to our Lord and his people. We were not afraid that we would acquire strange traits or customs. We were confident in who we were and comfortable within our own skins but willing to learn from others those things we needed to learn in order for us to do evangelism well.

This was not just for grown ups. It was a multigenerational call to obedience. We trained men, women and youth. As usual you would have few men! (ouch!) however, the men are now growing into a formidable force. Something like your Order of St Andrew, but are called different names in different places. Some of the youth were trained in children's ministries and sent out to do street "sunday school" during the week. We also had some going out into the countryside over weekends to hold evangelism rallies. These would be a mix of youth and adults willing to spend their weekends out singing and dancing the gospel and preaching. This has led to the church growth you hear about in Africa.

All this takes will, organization and resources. The parishes that are willing to do this will experience God's hand working among them in ways they had not expected. Our parish councils have to find it in themselves to put those resources aside. They have to accept the challenge of getting off their comfort zone. Cooperating with other churches who do these things as a matter of course will not taint you. To put it bluntly, Episcopalians are called to a new humility out of obedience to Christ's command to "Go...". Try it and you may recover your purpose in life!

This may sound novel to some but it is not. This is what the Decade of Evangelism was trying to remind us of and to call us to. The Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches did call for such a Decade of Evangelism in the late 1980s. Some resources were developed to be adapted for worldwide use. I do not want to go into a discussion about that Decade but I would like to point out some of the outcomes that may be useful as Episcopalians recover their evangelistic edge.

Before I get to that let us for a moment recall some aspects of our history in a few lines. The missionary movement in England in the nineteenth century also affected the Episcopal Church. As we noted earlier evangelism is integral to mission. So when we talk of that mission expansion we are also talking about the evangelization of the world. The mission societies and mission boards are a vestige of that movement. As we all know, the Episcopal Church is registered as the Domestic and Foreign Mission Society. As observed earlier the Anglican/Episcopal understanding of mission begins with that of proclamation of the good news. One other thing to note is that the proclamation of the good news knows no churchmanship. Some have associated Evangelicals with evangelism and Anglo-Catholics with worship and order. We have to remember that in the English Church (where churchmanship mattered!) of those years the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) which was High Church and Anglo-Catholic is older than the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which was evangelical. One would also want to recall the history of the Sunday School movement in the Church to see that some of what I was talking about in reference to Africa is really not new stuff. The Keswick Convention which is one of the movements which we participated in Malawi is an old English revival movement of that time.

Back to the fruits of the Decade of Evangelism. In the 1960s there was a pentecostal revival that began in California and spread throughout the world. This brought with it the importance of the gifts of the Spirit and the place of signs and wonders. The Anglican Communion worldwide was not immune from this movement. We can tell stories from around the world. This is what has continued on in various forms including the Power Evangelism we referred to earlier. In 1978 the Lambeth Conference acknowledged the place of such influences in the work of evangelism. This was the recognition of the Charismatic movement. This resulted in what was known as Anglican Renewal Ministries (ARM) which has now morphed into the Sharing of Ministries Abroad (SOMA). Fresh Expressions, the Alpha Course and the like in the UK are an offshoot of this movement. This flourished during the Decade of Evangelism and continues to this day. That signs and wonders attend the proclamation of the word and are not an end in themselves was understood and continues to be, within that movement. So the

movement was a movement of renewal and evangelism. It continues today and teams go back and forth between Africa and the USA and between Africa and the UK. This is where parish and diocesan links can be used to the benefit of evangelism. Parishes and individuals form teams that go and evangelize and teach for about ten days or more in an area chosen by the diocesan bishop. I have found this movement to be a good training ground for would be evangelists within the Episcopal/Anglican fold. The experience of going somewhere outside your usual place of residence and being expected to preach and teach has turned some timid Episcopalians into the evangelists they did not know they were. It is a safe place to experience God and how God uses even you to do things you did not realize you could do. I am here referring to public preaching both in church and in open air events and laying hands on people and seeing them healed and delivered. All this happens in a very safe Episcopal way and yet so powerfully. What would happen if we all took part? In this way Episcopalians can experience and do Power Evangelism without the stigma of the televangelists.

The worldwide web and whole electronic medium is another of those frontiers that we are called to go into. There are technologies and resources available for us to use and take advantage of. We ignore them at our peril. The Anglican Communion website has links and resources under its Mission and Evangelism department for the sharing of experiences and good practice. Youtube, radio and television are calling and so is Twitter. Occupy!

Conclusion

What I have been trying to communicate is that all of us, Episcopalians included, are called to be evangelists. We are called to personal evangelism or witnessing as well as corporate, whole body of Christ evangelism. Evangelism is not the domain of those other less guarded denominations. Being shy, coy and reticent is disobedience. Not putting resources into it at parish and diocesan level is disobedience. When we become obedient and do what the Lord desires, we are sure to be surprised by what we can do and accomplish in his name. Luke 10 gives an account of such a surprise by the disciples that even made Jesus ecstatic! You will know a new you and love you. I cannot imagine a bigger “ego” trip than

that. Because I have something better to share I am not ashamed to do it even as I know that I can learn from others (both of other faiths and fellow Christians). I am presumptuous also in the sense that I claim to do it not only in God's name but in God's power and that what I share is better, if not complimentary. Confidence or no confidence we are called to obedience and that obedience makes us vulnerable. This vulnerability gives a kenotic twist to the work of evangelism. Because evangelism is this incarnational (and Episcopalians are big on Incarnation!), it should not be alien or inimical to Episcopalians. We do not need to be someone else to bear witness for Christ. We share what we ourselves are in Christ: What you see is what you get. "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few", says the Lord. It is for this reason then that I say that to be an evangelist in the twenty-first century is to be obedient, presumptuously humble and vulnerable with no fear of taint. It is the Episcopal/Anglican way.