

A Spirituality of Mission – The Way of St Vincent de Paul

A Talk to the SSC General Synod

I was driving through Chorley a few weeks ago when I thought I'd been caught up in the rapture. There was a blinding flash, and I assumed it must be the second coming of the Lord or, at the very least, a host of angels. Then I realised it was a speed camera.

A few days later the inevitable letter arrived giving me the choice either of a large fine and three points on my license or a large fine and attendance at a Speed Awareness Course. I opted for the latter. But how embarrassing – a Bishop at Speed School! So I decided to create for myself what they call in the spy books a 'legend.' I dressed in a checked blue shirt and brown slacks and, should anyone ask, I would tell them that my name was Phil and that I was a social worker from Blackpool.

So I duly arrived at Oswaldtwistle for the speed school and took my place in the waiting room. The atmosphere was exactly the same as I remember from school detentions; that unique combination of anger, boredom and shame. I started chatting to a few of the people next to me when a large and booming voice came echoing round the room. 'Oh Bishop Philip!' it said. 'Fancy seeing you here!' Someone had worked out who I was.

St Vincent de Paul didn't really work out who he was until he was 37 years old, but nonetheless he is a saint whose life and teaching points us very clearly to who we are as Christians called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in a profoundly secular age.

Vincent was born in Gascony in 1581 and was baptised into a tired and corrupt French Church. It had failed to reach out into the new urban areas, parish life was in inexorable decline, the religious orders were weak and weary, the Church was strongly biased to the rich and was in bed, sometimes literally, with the aristocracy. Vincent was ordained at the age of 20 not because he was a pious and genuflectious youth but because he was ambitious. He was brought up in a simple home and because of the rigid class structure of seventeenth century France, the only way to get on in the world and rub shoulders with the wealthy was to join the Second Estate, the Church.

For the first two decades Vincent was just another career priest looking to use holy order to better himself. But then in 1518, whilst he was working for the wealthy de Gondi family, he had an experience of conversion which utterly transformed the whole course of his life. Vincent was called to a small hamlet called Châtillon les Dombes to administer the Last Rites to a dying peasant. He was utterly horrified by what he found: horrified by the physical poverty of this man who was living in unimaginable squalor surrounded by family members who barely had enough to eat, horrified also by his spiritual poverty because as this man lay on his death bed he did so in cold terror of Hell. No one had ever taught him of the sweet reprieve and ransom that we find in Jesus Christ.

Vincent was able to bring that man reassurance and lead him to faith. But as he did so, he himself was converted. As he ministered Christ, he met with Christ. And as all who are truly converted to Christ do, he realised that his vocation was to enable the conversion of others,

especially those in material or spiritual poverty. This was the moment when Vincent realised who he was and what he was called to do.

Along with others, Vincent then went on to uncover a spirituality that swept through France, that transformed and renewed the French Church and which soon had international impact. It led to missions being preached across France, to proper training and formation for clergy, to a renewal of Religious life, to the restoration of the Parish, to the recovery of the art of Spiritual Direction, to hospices, orphanages and proper care for the poor. It liberated laypeople and women for ministries that had previously been denied them. It was also one of the chief inspirations of the Oxford Movement and the founders of your own Society.

At the heart of this remarkable programme of renewal lay two passages of Scripture, both very close to Vincent's heart. The first was Luke Chapter 4 when Jesus addresses the crowd at the synagogue in Nazareth. *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.'* (Luke 4, 16). Vincent spoke constantly of Jesus as 'the evangeliser of the poor' and it was this devotion which drove everything he did. It motivated the missions, the works of charity, the love of justice.

The second was Matthew Chapter 25, the parable of the sheep and goats. *'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brother and sisters, you did it to me.'* (Matthew 25, 40). At one level what this means is simple: that when we serve someone who is poor or hungry or naked, we serve Jesus himself. But Vincent pushed this even further with revolutionary impact. If in serving the poor we serve Christ, then the poor show us Jesus. The poor in other words are our evangelists. As we minister to them, they also minister to us. At a stroke the traditional balance of power between those who have and have not is reversed. The rich may have money and food. The poor have something far greater which is the living presence of Jesus.

This means two things. First that service of the poor must be at the heart of any effective programme of renewal because it is through service of the poor that Jesus is proclaimed to all. Second that in serving the poor we are not merely performing a duty or doing someone a favour. Service is a privilege. As we serve, we receive back more than we give, so we should thank people for the opportunity of serving them.

All of this goes to show the central importance of the work that you do as priests, most of you serving in the poorest parts of the country. Analysis shows that, of the Parishes who have taken a Resolution under the House of Bishops declaration, two thirds are located in the 20% of most deprived parishes in the country. I suspect a broader analysis of the Catholic movement would show the same. You are serving the poor so you are at the cutting edge of the Church's mission. If we are to recapture the national imagination of the person of Christ, it will start in parishes such as yours.

So Vincent's spirituality was developed from strong Biblical roots. He soon came to realise though that if he wanted to renew a Church across a nation, it was no good working alone. He needed partners for the mission, and so a great deal of his life was spent calling, forming and teaching others. He founded the Congregation of the Mission, priests who would go out in pairs to preach in the villages that the Church had forgotten. With St Louise de Marillac he

founded the Daughters of Charity, a group of Sisters whose cloister was the world and who were revolutionary in serving the poorest of the poor. He started the Tuesday Conferences to offer formation to serving clergy and worked with M. Olier to found France's first Seminary at S. Sulpice in Paris. In order to train up all these men and women, he developed a simple spirituality which he called the Five Missionary Virtues. This was the heart of his teaching, and he would compare the five Virtues to the five smooth stones which David gathered to slay Goliath.

The first thing to note is that these are *missionary* virtues, in other words virtues fostered not for oneself or for one's own wellbeing but for the benefit of the others. One is encouraged to grow in them in order most effectively to serve the mission of the Church, because the purpose of the Christian life is to give it away to others as a gift. A great deal of our contemporary spiritual life is in danger of tending towards the consumerist. Prayer, retreats, spiritual direction, the spiritual life can all at times appear to be about oneself and one's own sense of feeling good in the Lord. In contrast the missionary virtues are about preparing missionaries for the mission field. It is a spirituality for the benefit of the world. And whilst some of the language may appear dated, the concepts that lie behind the words are to my mind extraordinarily relevant and insightful in a new age of mission.

The first and most important of the Missionary Virtues is **simplicity**. For Vincent this vital virtue had a range of meanings. It was about authenticity and living out in every aspect of one's life the faith one professed. It was about honesty and speaking and living truthfully. It was about lifestyle and living only on what one needs and not what one desires. It was also about language and teaching for a good Vincentian will speak a simple Gospel in language that people can understand.

We live in an age that is very quick to name and condemn hypocrisy, whether that be MPs fiddling their expenses, athletes taking performance enhancing drugs or clergy abusing children. We live in a culture that is fast, stressful and furiously paced where many presume that happiness is something that can be purchased and consumed. In this complex world, our simplicity is something that can make us distinctive. As we put faith into practice through our kindness, our honesty, our generosity, our love, people will notice that we are living differently. As we live simply, spurning needless luxury, eating and consuming only what we need, we will stand out in a greedy world. As we communicate in ways that make sense and in our preaching hear and respond to the questions on people's hearts, we will bring the Good News alive.

Vincent's second Missionary Virtue is **humility**, a word that, thanks to Mr Slope, has a very bad name. 'Oh I'm ever so humble.' But for Vincent humility has nothing to do with weediness or fake modesty. Rather it is a virtue drawn from the saving work of Christ. St Paul writes of Jesus in Philippians that he: '*...did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.*' (Philippians 2, 6-7a). For Vincent humility is that capacity to empty oneself of pride and self-centredness in order to be filled to the brim with Christ and his life.

Humility displays itself in an attitude of thankfulness that spurns any sense of entitlement and remembers that everything we have and are is gift from God. Humility is about

acknowledging one's utter dependence on God and remembering that without him we are nothing. It refuses to judge others or criticise needlessly or harshly.

As we have seen service of the poor lies at the very heart of a Vincentian spirituality. Humility is about fostering that attitude of mind that allows one to serve the poorest, even in ways that are abject or demeaning, in order that Christ might be seen in them.

The third Missionary Virtue is **mortification**. I took my niece to a terrible place called Meadowhall a few weeks ago, a vast and soulless shopping centre on the edge of Sheffield. Or to be precise she took me – I was merely the driver and the wallet. I felt a little awkward in the kind of shops she wanted to visit so I spent a lot of time standing outside, wondering why so many people were there and what it was that attracted them. The answer is gratification. They are there because they think that gratification is an instant thing, something that can be bought.

Mortification is about fostering the attitude of mind that accepts that gratification only comes with death, because when we can do that we are able to make sacrifices for the greater good. It means allowing some things to die so that we can focus all our energy and effort on what is most effective for the mission of the Church. It is mortification that allows us to rise early to pray, sacrificing unnecessary sleep for the greater good. Mortification also allows for the generosity and the commitment that enables effective mission, because we are able to let go of things that give us transient pleasure in order to be most effective for Christ.

In addition, mortification is about allowing some things to die in order that those that matter most can flourish. Clergy are geniuses at the art of displacement and we will allow endless activities – pointless meetings, visits we don't really need to do, groups that are moribund, administration that we can cut out ('Might this Order of Service look slightly better in Garamnd?) – get in the way of evangelism. Mortification means having the discipline and the courage to drop all these and get on with the one task that matters which is proclaiming good news to the poor. It also means doing a just a few things and doing them well and not killing ourselves by trying to do everything at once. I am tempted to say that a modern equivalent of mortification is a Mission Action Plan. Why not try sending in a Mortification Plan and see what your Diocesan Missioner makes of that?

The fourth Missionary Virtue is **meekness**. Do you remember Walter the Softy in the Beano, the pathetic boy Dennis used to Menace? That is the image that comes to my mind when I hear the word meekness. A meek person, one normally presumes, is weedy, pathetic, weak and indecisive, lacking their own will and all too ready to be bossed about by others.

But the way Vincent uses the word is very different and very perceptive. Meekness for him is about the way we handle anger. We might not want to accept it, but anger is an inevitable part of the priestly life. A priest who is doing their job well is bound to be angry – angry at the injustice we see inflicted on those we serve, angry at the pain of those to whom we minister especially when we feel that their pain is unnecessary, anger at the wider Church which can seem distant or hostile or unfeeling.

There is no point thinking that anger can be avoided. For Vincent what matters is how we handle it and meekness is the virtue that enables us to manage anger well. Anger can be managed with that compassion which understands another person, with forgiveness and with compassion. But perhaps above all, anger can be channelled into action. At Châtillon, Vincent was furious at the poverty of that peasant, angry with a society that allowed people to live in such poverty, angry at a Church that was so remiss in preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. But rather than allowing it to become a force for negativity or cynicism, he channelled his anger into action that led to a renewed Church that served the poor and proclaimed the Gospel effectively in every corner of the nation. In the same way, with the virtue of meekness we can channel our own anger so that it becomes a positive force for good. Anger at poverty can lead to action through charity and justice. Anger with the Church can lead to a strengthened desire for renewal.

And the fifth and final of Vincent's Missionary Virtues is **zeal**. Simplicity might be the most important of the virtues, but without zeal, nothing we do will come to anything. There is a growing tendency in the contemporary Church of England to turn priesthood into a profession. Many enter into it expecting terms and conditions as if it were a job: they ask about expected working hours, employment policies and job descriptions or they have impossible expectations of housing. Evangelism is thus likewise seen as something that can be lifted out of a manual. It is viewed as little more than a clause in the job description. As long as we follow the instructions from head office our churches are bound to grow.

But where is the zeal? Zeal is about a profound passion for souls, a desperate longing that all men and women might find life and purpose from relationship with Jesus Christ. It is borne of the utter conviction that faith in Jesus Christ is the only thing in all this creation which can save human life from captivity, absurdity and annihilation. It is not a virtue that can be taught but rather it arises from one's own ongoing conversion and the liveliness of one's own relationship with God. As Vincent's life shows us, it is our own conversion that gives us the zeal for the conversion of others.

Without zeal, all attempts at mission will be fruitless. You can have the best nurture course in the world, the most amazing mission action plan, the best resourced mission weekend, a team of hundreds but it will all come to nothing if there is no zeal. As Catholics we are brilliant at talking about mission, great at theorising, marvellous at holding conferences and staging events on catholic evangelism. To be honest I'm bored with all that. What we need to do now is get on and do some. And what that takes is zeal for souls.

Simplicity, humility, mortification, meekness, zeal. The missionary virtues that enable us to express our priesthood for the world, the virtues that equip us as evangelists, the virtues that enable us to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the poor. Which of these five, I wonder, resonate most closely with you? And perhaps more interestingly, which of the five most challenges, or indeed even convicts you?

+Philip Burnley

Feast of S Vincent de Paul 2017