

PROCLAIMING THE KERYGMA

The proclamation of the *kerygma* is at the heart of the new evangelisation. The term *kerygma* is a Greek word meaning “what is proclaimed”. It is the catch-word to denote the core of the Christian message. It is centre of all that we are lovingly compelled to communicate to the world. Pope Francis sums the *kerygma* up as “*the saving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ*”. St Paul similarly gives a succinct expression of the *kerygma* in Romans: “Jesus, who was put to death for our sins, and raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4: 25). When the *kerygma* is proclaimed in the Spirit, people experience a living encounter with the risen Christ.

Peter at Pentecost

Peter’s proclamation at Pentecost was simple and to the point. Under the anointing of the Holy Spirit he announced the *kerygma* with authority. This always has intrinsic power to change hearts. Speaking of Jesus, he cried out, “You killed him, but God raised him to life...all of us are witnesses to that...and what you see and hear is the outpouring of the Spirit...The whole house of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2: 22-36). Some in the crowd would have known about Jesus, the Nazarene, being crucified. But this was now 50 days after the crucifixion. They would have been shocked that now Peter was proclaiming that Jesus was alive! He had already risen, but they did not know it.

Now as Peter spoke in the Spirit Jesus arose in their hearts. They became convinced he was alive. When Peter boldly proclaimed "You crucified and killed him", the crowd could have easily complained that they were not responsible. They were just coming to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. But nobody complained about Peter's announcement. Why not? Because the Holy Spirit was convicting them of their sin. It was because of their sin that Jesus was nailed to the cross. As Isaiah said, "He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that sets us free. By his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:5). *Our* sins also crucified the Son of God. We also need to be convicted of the truth. It was *our* sins that nailed him, but it was his love that kept him there. But, as Peter proclaimed to the people gathered in Jerusalem, "God raised him from the dead!" That is our hope. Peter was boldly proclaiming the overwhelming truth that "Jesus is Lord!"

Moved by his preaching the people cried out, "What must we do?" Convinced by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is Lord, they knew it meant a decision. Peter called them to repentance, faith and baptism in the Spirit. To recognise the Lordship of Jesus is to declare you belong to Jesus. It is to surrender your whole being into his loving hands and to trust your life to him. It is to accept that Jesus has every claim upon you; that he is Master of your life. It is an act of total submission that sets the soul free from captivity and brings you into a new intimacy with Jesus that sustains you through any trial or tribulation.

Jesus is Lord

Paul is a good example of this. After he had been blinded by an encounter with the glorious, risen Christ on the road to Damascus he spent three days in darkness. Then baptised by Ananias he was never the same again. Writing to the Philippians he says, "I believe nothing

can outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord" (Phil 3:8). He was willing to accept the loss of every previous privilege and possession, as long as he had Christ and was given a place in him. The light of Pentecost reveals to us the truth of Jesus as Lord. Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, who had been a scholar in Christology at the University of Milan, testifies that it was not until he experienced the grace of the new Pentecost that he really came to know Jesus. While he had studied all that the Fathers of the Church had written about Jesus, and knew the theological controversies like the back of his hand, he had not yet really encountered Christ. He says,

The discovery of Jesus as 'Lord' that came to me along with baptism in the Spirit wrought a great change that I would never have been able to achieve by myself alone. It seemed to me that I became able to see what lay behind Saint Paul's experience, when all at once he began to consider as 'disadvantage' all the things that before he had looked upon as 'advantages' he had enjoyed in life, and as "so much rubbish" everything other than "the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord". I saw all at once what boundless gratitude, what pride and joy were hidden in that phrase of his, in that pronoun in the singular, "Christ Jesus *my* Lord".⁷¹

Fr Raniero goes on to say that there is a huge difference between the Christ you read about in books, and talk about in learned discussions, and the one whom we meet in reality. No wonder Pope Francis has called us all to a new level of reality:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.⁷²

To proclaim Jesus is Lord in the time of the early Church was a dangerous thing indeed. It is an affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ. In the Creed we say "I believe in *one* Lord Jesus Christ" (cf 1 Cor 8:5-6). At that time the term "lord", *kurios* in the Greek, was used of the emperor. People were expected to bow before the emperor and burn incense before his effigy, acknowledging him as "lord". If they refused to do so the consequences were prison or death. In proclaiming "Jesus is Lord" Christians were refusing to bow in adoration before anybody but Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. The term "*kurios*" is the Greek translation of the ineffable Hebrew name "YHWH" from the Old Testament; they were proclaiming that Jesus is God. The newly born Christian faith was up against a world with many "gods" and "lords", yet they were ready to put their lives on the line for the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, the only true God. Paul quotes a hymn they used to sing in their liturgies, "God the father raised him from the dead and gave him a name which is above every other name, so that now at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and in earth and in the underworld, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-11).

Heart of the Renewal

Unfortunately the sharpness of this fundamental proclamation was blunted quickly in the tradition. Already in the third century the title "Lord" was no longer used in the kerygmatic meaning. The term "Lord Jesus" became a name to refer to Christ but was largely emptied of its power. Often it was reduced to a description of his personage as "Our Lord". It is one thing to say "Our Lord Jesus Christ" and another to proclaim "Jesus Christ is our Lord!" However, in the late 1960s, just after the Council, with the new outpouring of the

Spirit, the proclamation on everyone's lips was "Jesus is Lord!" The Holy Spirit inspired songs and worship times focussed on this one proclamation. Since then we have been experiencing a revival of this kerygmatic enthusiasm. Jesus is not meant to be a figure to remember from the past, no longer a personage known from a distance, but a living person who is always present to us in the Spirit.

Paul tells us that "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (1Cor 12:3). With the new outpouring of the Spirit we are gaining a new freedom to proclaim the *kerygma*. At another time Paul says, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you shall be saved" (Rom 10:9). In the light of the experience of Pentecost our proclamation, "Jesus is Lord" is more than lip service. It means we want Jesus to rule over everything – our job, our finances, our relationships, and every dimension of our life.

When we read the gospels we find that Jesus' whole ministry in word and action was to proclaim the "kingdom of God", which meant that God's loving rule was breaking into this world, and if we want fullness of life we need to submit to his reign over us through genuine conversion of heart. After the resurrection this proclamation *by* Jesus during his ministry becomes the proclamation *of* Jesus as Lord. It is the same message requiring the same response of repentance and faith. There can be no half-hearted response. The difference prior to Pentecost is that the disciples did not have the power of the Spirit to be able to respond whole-heartedly. After Pentecost, with the Spirit upon them, they now had the anointing for a new level of holiness and a new boldness to proclaim the good news. How much we need this Pentecost experience! Without it we are ill equipped for a life of discipleship and crippled in our attempts to evangelise.

Start from the Beginning

Under the grace of the new Pentecost we realise that we must start again. After 2,000 years of Christianity we have built up a huge edifice of magisterial teaching, liturgical celebration, theological reflection, manifold institutions, extensive laws to cover every situation, and a wealth of spirituality. This rich patrimony is the beauty of our Catholic experience. But in these days the Spirit is moving to call us back to the beginnings. At Vatican II there was a move to "return to the sources" for the sake of renewal. We went back to the scriptures and the Fathers of the Church to find a new vitality for our self-understanding as Church in the modern world. This has provided a totally new impetus for mission in the world today. This return to our origins must also recapture the simplicity of the kerygmatic proclamation of the good news. An image provided by Cantalamessa can help.

At the bow of a large ship there is a point which breaks through the sea first. This represents the proclamation of the *kerygma*, that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification, or more succinctly, "Jesus is Lord". But as the ship goes through the sea it leaves behind an ever widening wake, which is as it were expanding this initial point. At first there are the four gospels, written to explain the initial core of the message, and then the rest of the New Testament. Then came the Tradition of the Church with all its teaching, liturgy, theology, spirituality and laws. At this stage in history we have a wake from the ship with a vast expanse. If we are to evangelise the modern post-Christian world, where do we start? The huge arsenal of doctrine and plethora of institutions can be a hindrance if we are trying to reach those who have lost contact with the Church, and even for those who are still members but without much living personal faith. In our preaching we must start again at the beginning! It was the point of the bow of the ship which had the initial breakthrough at

Pentecost when Peter preached and 3,000 were converted. And it will be the same *kerygma* which will bring people to a personal encounter with Jesus today.

Stemming the Tide of Defection

Without this sharpness and clarity of proclamation of the gospel, and without the living personal encounter with Jesus that it brings, people will remain confused and disenchanted with the Church. Many are in fact defecting from the Catholic Church to Pentecostal or evangelical groups, not because they are necessarily scandalised by the Church but simply because they find the preaching of the word of God which is relevant to their lives, and have the meaning of scripture opened up for them. They also find a community of disciples which really believes what is preached and seeks to live it. Often when I meet these people I find that they simply fell in love with Jesus, who they had not previously been led to encounter, even though they were practising Catholics.

Our theology tells us this is nonsense, since every Eucharist is potentially the most personal living encounter with Christ available to us on this earthly journey. How could people who have been regular at Sunday Mass walk away? There was a serious disconnect between their liturgical life and their lived reality. To ignore the reality of their experience would be to our peril. They witness to the unexpressed hunger in so many to know the saving love of Jesus. They will not come to this personal faith unless Jesus is preached in the Spirit. As Paul said:

All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. But they will not call on his name if they do not have faith, and they will not have faith if they do not hear the word, and they will not hear the word unless they get a preacher, and they will not get a preacher unless one is sent. (Rom 10:14)

It is important to emphasise that faith does not simply come from some sort of cultural osmosis. As if you grow up in a Catholic family and you automatically become a believer. In a later chapter I intend to say something about the crucial role of culture in the transmission of faith. But the Catholic culture will be deficient for the task before us today if it does not have at its heart the proclamation of the *kerygma*. Otherwise we will continue to witness Catholic schools producing well-educated graduates, the vast majority of whom have little or no faith. We will continue to labour with parishes with well-meaning participants who have little or no motivation to do anything but maintain the status quo.

Missionary zeal only comes when there is a fire in the heart from a faith which has been personally awakened by kerygmatic preaching. Students in our schools and good people in our parishes have a hidden hunger for the gospel to be preached. Often they are not fully aware of this hunger since it is subliminal. But it can be awakened. It is as if they are like the Greeks who came to Philip requesting, "We want to see Jesus" (Jn 12:22). When the good news is proclaimed the Risen Christ himself is made present and he speaks; people "see Jesus" in the faith that is aroused. The Holy Spirit moves and persuades the listener, opening the heart. In the Acts when Paul was at Philippi he went down by the river and began to preach to some women. We are told by Luke that Lydia "listened to us, and the Lord *opened her heart* to accept what Paul was saying" (Acts 16:15). Our preaching the *kerygma* will open hearts, not due to our eloquence but due to the Holy Spirit at work in our listeners.

Unleashing the Hidden Energy of the Gospel

The burning question, which was voiced by Pope Paul VI, that keeps coming back to me, is "How in today's world can we unleash

the hidden energy of the gospel in such a way that it can change the hearts of our contemporaries?"⁷³ I believe a vital part of the answer is in the proclamation of the *kerygma*. This is not only by spoken word, but also by drama, music and song, art and poetry. I remember when I had asked a young man to take part in the reading of the passion on Good Friday. He was to join with others in shouting out "Crucify him! Crucify him!" He told me later that as he did this he was overwhelmed with the truth that he had crucified Jesus by his sins and wept with tears of repentance. At weekends for young people often the turning point for many is the re-enacting of the passion of Jesus as they are touched deeply by the love the Saviour has for them and receive a grace to accept Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians he was furious with them since they had submitted again to the ways of the Mosaic Law rather than live by faith in Christ. He says, "Are you people in Galatia mad? Has someone put a spell on you, before whose eyes Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal 3:1) Now Paul obviously had not presented a "passion play" for the Galatians. He had preached to them. This gives us a good insight into what and how he preached. He proclaimed Jesus crucified! Another translation says he gave "a plain explanation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ". And Paul reminds them that it was not because of the Law that they received the Spirit, but because of his preaching the crucified Lord (Gal 3:2). The sort of preaching which has a transforming effect upon listeners is when Christ crucified and risen is proclaimed.

When Paul had preached to the Council of the Areopagus in Athens he had sought to meet them with some contemporary philosophy. But he had little success in convincing them. It seems this failure sharpened up his preaching. When he arrived at Corinth there was a

new quality of fire in his message. He later reminds the Corinthians of how he came among them:

As for me, brothers, when I came among you, it was not with any show of oratory or philosophy, but simply to tell you what God had guaranteed. During my stay with you, the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ.

He says he did not want to engage with them in philosophical debate, but only “by a demonstration of the power of the Spirit” (1Cor 2:1-5). When we preach Jesus crucified we can expect that the Holy Spirit will move powerfully amongst the people, just like at the first Pentecost. In this Spirit-filled mode of communication we are not in any way preaching ourselves, but holding up Christ to be honoured and adored. When we do this Christ himself speaks. As one great preacher said to me, “Whenever you stand up for Christ, he will stand up with you”.

The Basic Content?

What is the content of the *kerygma*? What is the core message that needs to be proclaimed. I hesitate to give formulas, since there are a thousand ways to be creative in bringing this fundamental good news. In a previous book, entitled *Amazing Love*,⁷⁴ I attempted to give a thematic outline of this saving message, which is at the core of all Spirit-filled evangelisation. It is not easy to give a condensed version. I consider it more important for us to deepen in the mystery of Christ and his redemption of the world in all its many dimensions, and preach out of the reality of that experience. The danger is that we will settle for theological propositions, rather than witness to the truth of who Christ is for us now. Our proclamation has to be delivered in the Spirit and each time have a freshness and creativity provided by

the Lord. However, if I was asked to make a quick summary of the content of the *kerygma* I would say something like this:

- God created us out of love to be in communion with him and with one another. His plan was for us to live in total harmony within ourselves and with one another. His love for us is total, unconditional and everlasting. We find our identity and worth in him, and our destiny is to be fully with him forever.
- Sin entered the world through Adam, and we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This has brought rupture to our relationship with God, with one another, within ourselves and with the whole of creation. It was impossible for us to restore this relationship with God which was broken by our disobedience
- “God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save the world” (Jn 3:17). God became one of us so that by solidarity with us he could redeem us. He took upon himself the consequences of our sin, so that we could be set free. The cross is a sign of his infinite love for us. “What proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us”. God the Father raised him from the dead. This is the source of our hope. We are set free from the power of sin and Satan, and given new life. “For all who are in Christ there is a new creation; the old is gone and the new is here” (2Cor 5:17).
- We need to say “yes” to what has been accomplished for us by Jesus and already applied to our lives through Baptism, when we were immersed into the death and resurrection of Christ. We need to repent of our sins, break with our old ways of living according to the ways of the world, and open ourselves to the saving power of Jesus Christ. We need to surrender to him as Lord of our lives

- We need to ask for the experience of a new Pentecost in our lives; to ask for the grace of our Baptism and Confirmation to be released more fully when we received the Holy Spirit for empowering in personal holiness and for bringing the good news of Jesus to others.
- All of this needs to be experienced within the community of believers and lead towards deeper Eucharistic communion.

8

GRACE AND MERCY

The self-sufficiency and self-reliant attitude prevalent in today's society plays into an endemic weakness in traditional Catholic culture. Not a few Catholics are still caught in the bind that they must earn their own way to heaven by good works. God will come to help them, but only to the extent that they attract his attention and win his favour by keeping their religious nose clean and staying out of too much trouble. We need to regain our belief in God's love, his grace and mercy. John says, "We are the ones who have put our faith in God's love for us" (1Jn 4:16). But many find this difficult. They are locked into an attitude akin to what Paul in his letters calls the "Law".

Paul insisted that keeping the Mosaic Law does not make you right with God. The Law can only show you how you have sinned, but it can't save you from sin. He was adamant that you can only attain salvation from sin by the sheer gift of God's grace, which was definitively released into the world by the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection into glory. We are made right with God by faith in what Jesus has accomplished for us on the cross, not by our unaided efforts to imitate his virtuous life from a distance. That is why Paul exclaimed, "I am no longer living trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith".(Phil 3:9)