

Sunday after Ascension Day, Easter 7, 24.05.2020

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

From Greenland's icy mountains,
From India's coral strand,
Where Afric's sunny fountains
Roll down their golden sand;
From many an ancient river,
From many a palmy plain,
They call us to deliver
Their land from error's chain.

Some of you will remember that hymn, but not many who are younger than me. We owe its writer a great deal. Reginald Heber was a talented and inspiring clergyman of the early 19th century. He was a fine scholar and not a bad poet. In his day the Church of England didn't sing hymns in its services unless they were metrical psalms or texts of Scripture. Heber's view was not so much 'why should the devil have all the good tunes' as 'why should the non-conformists have them?'. By the age of 40 he had written 57 hymns – perhaps the later Mr Heinz was emulating him. Heber asked the Bishop of London to endorse his proposal to publish a collection of hymns written both by him and by others. The Bishop, with classic Anglican caution, said that he should publish them but he would await giving his endorsement until he had seen how the public reacted. They never were published until after his death, which sadly wasn't too many years later. Heber at the age of 40 was made the Bishop of Calcutta in the far-off domains of the East India Company. He became something of a missionary celebrity, well-known and regarded in both the whole of India, where he travelled extensively, and back home. He lived for less than three years.

His hymns were published and helped to kickstart the Church of England into singing them and others. Five have made it into the latest incarnation of Ancient & Modern that we use (not at 8 o'clock, of course), perhaps the best known being 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning', which we sing at Epiphany, and 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty' that I suspect we'll be singing in two weeks' time, on Trinity Sunday.

'From Greenland's icy mountains', however we won't be singing, because its tone is a just a bit too condescending towards the wider not-yet-Christianised world:

*They call us to deliver
Their land from error's chain.*

Might be thought just about OK, but most of us would struggle a bit with verse 2:

*What though the spicy breezes
Blow soft on Ceylon's isle;
Though every prospect pleases,
And only man is vile;
In vain with lavish kindness
The gifts of God are strown;
The heathen, in his blindness,
Bows down to wood and stone.*

Gandhi certainly took exception to it: "My own experience in my travels throughout India has been to the contrary ... [Man] is not vile. He is as much a seeker after truth as you and I are, possibly more so".

There is much about Heber – his story, his writings, his ministry – that is inspiring, but most of us would now say that his missionary vision was too allied to the unattractive side of the British imperial vision with its lack of respect for native culture and its innate sense of superiority.

It was inspired by the early church, by St Luke's account of the first missionaries in the Acts of the Apostles, who took the gospel from Jerusalem into Judaea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. But what got lost in transmission from the first century to the 19th was that this was not an empire they were spreading but a kingdom and a kingdom not like any other – whose armies, as another hymn-writer put it, 'we may not count', whose 'fortress is a faithful heart', whose 'pride is suffering', whose 'ways are ways of gentleness' and whose paths are all peace.

Those sent out by the risen Lord to the ends of the earth weren't an Oxbridge elite sent with the protection of embassies and armies, they were sent with no protection and no pretension – and what they encountered along the way was not an ignorant world that needed their superior wisdom but a world that in part was both eager to embrace what they received as a universal message and which also was bit by bit to transform the narrow perspectives of the missionaries into a much bigger vision that was informed by their missionary encounters – in other words, they learned as much as they taught and that led to a church which by the end of the Acts story has a radically bigger vision of God's purposes for the world than it began with. The journey to the uttermost ends of the earth was a journey of discovery for everyone. It was not a conquest by the few – a great imperial landgrab; it was a new co-operative and universal endeavour and vision.

This week, with Thy Kingdom Come, I am praying for five people I know to come to know Christ in all his transforming and saving grace; but I am also praying for me that they may teach me to see him more fully and more universally, because my vision of God, my understanding and knowing God is far too small and limited and prejudiced. If I am to pray that many people may be converted through my ministry I must regard the chiefest of those to be converted to be me.