

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Epiphany 5, February 5, 2017
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I have spent some time in Kenya making occasional visits over the last 20 years or so. The British Army has a large Training Unit there, and over 10,000 soldiers exercise there each year which is about 1/3 of the main part of the deployable Army. Kenya is an amazing place. It is the only place that you can see 50 cc motorbikes driving along with a full sized 3- seater sofa carefully balanced across the back and sticking out 4 feet on either side! There are also some very unusual business combinations -- like the hotel that is also a butcher's shop which displays the sign in 2-foot-high letters, "Hotel Butchery." Not very encouraging on all sorts of levels!

It reminds me of a story the Bishop of London once told when he came to preach at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, when I was chaplain there. There were two businesses in the same town, the owners of which met and fell in love. The lady was a vet and had a little practice in the high street. On the other side of town her boyfriend owned a taxidermist business. After a time, they got married and decided that they could make more money by sharing a premises. This they duly did, and to launch the new location they bought some advertising space in the local paper. What they published read "Robertson and Robertson Vet and Taxidermist. Either way you get the dog back!" This is just a funny story but I tell you this could absolutely happen in Kenya!

I have many happy memories of times there in fact. On one occasion I went with a medical regiment right into the north of the country near Lake Turkana and the Sudanese border. We were 150 miles from the nearest metal road and about as far as that from the nearest dentist and proper hospital. We were mostly doing vaccinations but also some limited primary health care, and we had a dentist with us. In fact, that dentist probably alleviated more suffering than all of the medics. It was wonderful to see how people, in some instances crippled with toothache for years, could be released from misery in a few minutes by his services. He took out a lot of teeth -- hundreds in fact!

It was the strangest feeling to set up camp in the middle of the wilderness with no sign of habitation or life as far as the eye could see in any direction. You would look round and think, "This is a complete waste of time. No one is anywhere near here." Miraculously, within a few hours, figures would emerge from the scrub and we would have a long queue of Turkana or Samburu tribesmen and women waiting for treatment. Many of the children were scared of us because they had never seen a white face.

As a Padre (a chaplain), it was good to travel with the young soldiers to these far flung places. Whether it was exercises like that, or on operations, you were a one-man band, often working with soldiers that had little or no experience of the faith or the Church. Sometimes it was hard to see what on earth you were doing there. Many hours of traveling and days of just doing whatever the soldiers were doing and sharing some of their risks and hardships. Sometimes, however, the most sharply focused and poignant moments would come along, and you realized exactly what you were doing.

I remember on that medical exercise, for instance, I had offered to pray with people who were waiting for treatment. I got the interpreter to tell the long line of, mostly, women that the priest over underneath the tree was offering to pray for them and to go over if they wanted that. I thought a couple might come across but to my amazement there was soon as long a queue of

people for prayer as there was for medical care. Well, I don't know about it. I couldn't speak their language. and they didn't understand English, but I laid hands on them and prayed for them anyway. What was more immediately telling, however, was the young soldier who had been watching this and who came to speak to me afterwards. It turns out that, somehow, this incident had triggered a whole range of things in him about life and faith that just came flooding out. Later, I was privileged to be the first person ever to have prayed with him, and I think it was a significant moment in his life on a number of levels. I only did what any priest would have done for him, but I was able to do so because I was there. That was worth many hours under a hot sun.

Jesus says "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

In this saying Jesus blesses us and challenges us. He tells us, not that we should be the light of the world, but that we "are" the light of the world. Of course **it is** a challenge to us because we immediately recognize that our little light is not nearly as bright as it should be. If we picture ourselves as a city on a hill or light on a stand giving light to the world, we feel less than comfortable. But Jesus says that we are the light of the world, and if we reflect a moment I think we can see that, despite our short comings, this can still be true.

Light is the opposite of darkness. In fact, as we know, it is only light that actually exists. Darkness is simply the absence of light. Light has substance. Darkness is just nothing. Even a dim and flickering candle is infinitely more real than the darkness that falls if it goes out.

Like the Army Padre, we may wonder what on earth we are doing as Christians some of the time. Our light doesn't seem to be making much difference and it doesn't seem that bright at all to us. And yet, then there comes the moment when we are able to be the only light around for someone: A friend who is sad and alone in the darkness of grief or doubt; A stranger who is frightened and alone in some particular night of their own. Then, suddenly we find ourselves the only light in the room and, against complete darkness, even the smallest of lights seems like a sun that brings warmth and hope and life. Jesus doesn't say we are the brightest and best of the sons of the morning, just that we are his light in this dark world, whatever we are like.

"A city built on a hill cannot be hid." I am conscious that this passage has special significance for Americans and how this country has perceived itself down the years. John F Kennedy, Ronald Regan, and Barrack Obama have all referred to it as an aspiration and expression of what this nation might mean for its people and the world. I read for the first time last week the full text of the famous thesis written by the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, called "A Model of Christian Charity." He wrote it aboard the ship Arbella in 1630 as it, with six other vessels and some 700 Puritans, sailed from England across the vast ocean to new England and the new world.

It is a carefully reasoned and deliberate piece. His objective is very clear. He is seeking to bind together every individual in the expedition and to prepare them for the enormous challenge that lay ahead. In front of them was the unknown and the untamed wilderness. No cities or towns or roads or farms or anything that they had known and relied on where they came from. They would be starting from nothing and facing unknown dangers and unpredictable hardships. He could not say anything about what they would face because he did not know. All he could do was to drive home to them who they were and what brought them to where they were.

They were there because they were Christians, and he sets out in no uncertain terms how, as members of the body of Christ, they were utterly dependent on each other. Rich or poor, strong or weak, they were called to bear one another's burdens and to lay down their lives for each other if called on to do so. Winthrop sets their position out as a covenant between them and God and then sets out the stark consequences of failing to keep it. Interestingly, he picks those very words of Micah the Prophet that Kristen spoke about last week:

"Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. ... We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together... as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, ... when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies;

And then the famous words: "He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'may the Lord make it like that of New England.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work ... we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

These are hard words, but they needed to be because this group of 700 people had no one to help them except each other and the Almighty. They had staked everything, and there could only be two outcomes: hard won survival and success, or utter failure and probably death.

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

As we hold our 200th Annual Parish Meeting and move forward towards our bicentenary we might do worse than to reflect on the Arbella and John Winthrop. The seas we navigate and the land that lies ahead of us are not so challenging as the ones they faced, but they are not without dangers. If we are to be a city set on a hill at Christ Church, if we are to follow our Lord's command to let the light of our faith shine before others with good works that glorify God, then Winthrop's words are apposite.

"We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together... as members of the same body."

We have done this, and Christ Church is the church it is because people from many different perspectives have been able to do that before us. Civil War and World Wars and all the storms of change have battered against this ship over the last 200 years, but it has still prevailed because people have somehow managed to put Christ before their own opinions and passions and to respect those around them with whom they disagree.

The ship is strong, the light is bright, but -- like those first sailors on the Arbella, or my soldiers on operation in Kenya -- it will only be so if we can "delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together... as members of the same body."