Twenty-eighth Sunday C 2019

We are into the Second week of our ‘Extraordinary Month of Mission’ and are asked to reflect on the witness of missionary saints and martyrs. The first person who sprang to my mind was Mother Teresa - St Teresa of Calcutta, as she now is. She was preeminently a missionary. Indeed the order she founded in Calcutta in 1950 is known as the Missionaries of Charity. When we think of Mother Teresa and her order’s work we don’t think first of preaching the Gospel, but rather of them nursing the sick and dying in the poorest places on earth. The members of the order take four vows - the expected poverty, chastity and obedience and also a vow ‘to give whole hearted, free service to the poorest of the poor’.

We have just listened to the gospel - Jesus cures the lepers - the outcasts. Certainly socially they were the poorest of the poor of his time. It is interesting to note that he doesn’t preach to the lepers - he simply responds to their piteous cry for help. He only speaks of matters of faith when one of them - the Samaritan, the despised of the despised, comes back to thank him. Here we have the template for missionary work. There is undoubtedly a wonderful gospel to be preached. But those who preach must live it. If love is to be preached then love must be shown.

Pope Benedict insisted that all who do missionary work - at home or abroad - work to alleviate suffering, work to help those in need. Responding to the need is the first thing - if those helped want to know what the motivation is of those who are helping them then it is proper to explain. But the work should not be done in order to preach the gospel - it should be done as a work of love and service.

Mother Teresa was criticised in her life time by some who questioned what her priorities were. Whatever the truth of all that is - and it won’t be a simple truth - the work she and her order undertook, and still undertake; work with the utterly destitute, work with those dying of AIDS, creating places of safety for orphans; such works have made a profound impression in very many countries - and changed many lives, and deaths, for the better.

We may be nervous about preaching the gospel - but we should never be nervous of loving and serving anyone in need. Through that love-in-action God will work his purpose out.