

Sermon for Lesslie Newbigin's Centenary Service- Edinburgh- 6.12.09

The titles of some of Lesslie Newbigin's books say much about this extraordinary Christian whose life we celebrate today. 'South India Diary', the entrancing stories of a missionary bishop; 'The Good Shepherd', the record of addresses to his clergy in Madras, that live today as inspiring examples of pastoral theology; 'The Other Side of 1984', an urgent book of prophecy, which could become the other side of 2000; 'Unfinished Agenda' - so much more to go, a record of a Spirit led ministry; and, not by him, but of him, Geoffrey Wainwright's major tome, 'Lesslie Newbigin, a theological life.' Here was a man who lived theology, and whose theology came out of a life lived to the full.

Three Biblical texts came to my mind, as I prepared this sermon- from the book of Zechariah, an obscure text I was given to reflect on, as I came to ordination, and never forgotten, 'Despise not the Day of Small Things' - Lesslie's ministry was based on honouring of small things and small people, above all; St Paul's ringing testimony, 'I preach only Christ and him crucified,' the heart of his ministry as preacher and evangelist; and this passage of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus that we have just heard- this reminded me immediately of the photograph we see reproduced on the front of 'Theological Life', and elsewhere- Jesus in the Dalit village, receiving water from an untouchable, woman of Samaritan faith, and of dubious morals; how many villages did Lesslie go to, where he was dependent on the hospitality of the illiterate untouchable villagers. Here the dialogue leads to her receiving the living water of Christ; a paradigm for much of Lesslie's ministry of dialogue- this was not the dry science of inter faith dialogue, it was lived encounter across humanly created barriers of culture, gender, education and religion.

With this introduction, and within this framework, I wish now to focus upon certain crucial aspects of Lesslie's life, ministry and mission, as I encountered them in South India and in Birmingham, two of the three centres for my ministry, the third being Leicester where I am now. I reflect on him as evangelist, churchman, prophet, pastor, theological educator, ecumenist, theologian, and human being. I could add as inspirer,

since he inspired so many, including myself and I am sure, those of us who are here on this cold Edinburgh December night.

As evangelist: I think here of Tamil villages, of Winson Green, a deeply poor area of Birmingham, and of Desmond Tutu. I used to visit the remotest Christian villages of the Madurai Diocese, when a faculty member at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, and researcher into questions of conversion, and wherever I went I heard of another 'vellaikarer' white man, who had been there before me, who spoke wonderful Tamil- a sign of his burden for evangelism, for expressing the gospel in simple village Tamil. What came over was how he loved them into the Christian faith. But, above all, he came to support the local catechist or village teacher or pastor, in doing this. It was their ministry. So also in Winson Green, where at the age of 70, he took responsibility for the URC church next to this notorious prison, and enabled it to live, bringing over with the help of CWM, Pastor Rahi, a Punjabi evangelist, and the congregation became multi cultural, reflecting the area, not just a rump of loyal incomers keeping a building going. And his chairing of the ecumenical committee, of which I was a part, bringing over Desmond Tutu to lead a mission to secular Birmingham, an evangelistic week full of joy and challenge; secular Birmingham needed to hear the gospel and from an African.

As churchman: Lesslie was thoroughly a churchman, conscious though he always was of the faults of the church. When I went to Madurai, to the Seminary to teach, he said I must immediately report to the Bishop there, under whose authority I would be and needed a license, not of CMS London, nor, as a pastor, of the Principal of the Seminary. The Bishop concerned did not know what to do with me, when I called, 'Do as you will, I do not need to authorise you'. When I told Lesslie this, he felt concerned about structures. He believed above all in a church where there would be no rich nor poor, no high caste and low caste. He was not prepared to go with the argument of the Church Growth School of Macgavran, in the USA, with whom he argued, that caste churches can be lived with, because numbers will thereby increase. Quality, not quantity, was his view, so the church can be the salt of the nation. He argued, on the other hand, with his great friend MM Thomas, the greatest theologian of post independence India. MM

argued that baptism was dispensable with, because it was linked in the mind of India, with westernisation. For Lesslie, Baptism was the sine qua non of becoming part of the Body of Christ, because it was the command of Christ.

As pastor: I first met this aspect when I took up ministry as a chaplain in Madurai prison, from my Methodist predecessor Bill Harris. I found that we were both entering into the heritage of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, and this ministry continues and is now in its sixth decade. Lesslie went a long journey with me to Bill's funeral on the south coast, to honour his successor- 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.' As a Bishop, he began this care of the most caste out of all communities. From Birmingham he used to write in Tamil, on those old areogrammes, that preceded e mails, to elderly extra prisoners or their children. His pastoral care was shown in a village called Virambal. In the 80's, I visited this Christian congregation of Dalits. They showed me proudly, the bullets in the church wall, where several had died in an attempt by the surrounding high case to force them back to Hinduism, since their new faith had giving them the confidence to stop working on the Sabbath, and to refuse to be bonded labourers. I asked them for the story in full. I heard how their 'Perairyer' Lesslie Newbing, had come down from Madurai in the night, and stood by them, and intervened with the authorities and stopped the violence. So they had won their freedom. A third pastoral vignette, was of Lesslie visited weekly Colin Buchanan, who had resigned as Suffragan Bishop of Aston in Birmingham, because the Desmond Tutu mission had been a success spiritually, but a failure financially. Responsible for the finance, Colin resigned, and was isolated in his house for months, while he waited for another calling. His own church colleagues left him friendless, it was Lesslie who became his chief pastor.

Theological Educator: I experienced him directly at Selly Oak, as lecturer in Mission, and teacher in Area Studies for India. He was outstanding in both. But he influenced my and my family's life directly, when we were selected to go to South India, and I was given a choice of seminaries in Trivandrum, Kerala, or Madurai. 'Do you want to go to a tropical paradise, green and with beautiful beaches a few miles away? Or do you want to

go to one of the hottest places in the world, dusty, intense, in the heart of Hindu India, and the fervent of Tamil culture? ‘ There was not choice, particularly when he added that the Principal there was Dr Sam Amirtham, now 75 or so, chosen in his 30’s, the most brilliant theological educator in Asia, to head up the unitred seminary for Tamil people’s that he had dreamed of from the 1930’s- see his hand written diaries which I borrowed. Lesslie’s insights about people were shown in being the key person to choose Sam as founding Principal, and another young man, BJ Prashantham, as founder of the unique Christian Counselling Centre, in Vellore, where I was to learn most of what I know about counselling. He could see ‘what was in a man or woman.’

As ecumenist: This does not need much rehearsing, and his crucial role in the formation of the CSI, and his leading role at the WCC, in its seemingly great days. Here he engaged with Karl Barth, who influenced him so much theologically. The quest for unity was not just functional, but spiritual. His words on the founding service of the CSI- ‘Never again will I say that a thing which I believe is God’s will is impossible....The tide of the Spirit just rose, and blotted out old boundaries.’ He believed in structural unity, and not just unity of fellowship. One of his great sorrows was the CSI went no further- he started the talks with the Lutherans, he was very sad when they were given up with no result. He joined the URC on his return, as the only church that has achieved anything solid in terms of unity.

The prophet: He was this increasingly as his long life progressed. In Madras, he saw the critical need for the church and Diocese to engage with the Tamil Political leaders, the DMK movement, led by a young poet, Karunanadhi, who lives on grandfather of the present ruling party. He became an advisor to this young political leader. Lesslie was not a political leader with great power, he was valued as a wise counsellor, with prophetic insights about where his beloved Tamilnadu should go, with his concern for the poor. But most well known is, of course, his post Indian leadership in Britain. He focused down upon two messages- the need to reassert Christian confidence in the face of what he termed pagan Britain- and the need to take Islam seriously as an ally, with its refusal to give up the high ground, and allow religion and the spiritual to be marginalised. I wonder

what he would have made of the post 9/11, 7/7 world. The last time I heard him lecture was at St Andrew's Hall, Selly Oak. He said he was dangerous now, because he could no longer read, and so spoke over dogmatically. The message was a ringing call to claim the high ground, following the Muslim example. I think there is an echo of these things in our present Archbishop Rowan's agendas- but as a communicator he is so much the academic professor, while Lesslie was the preacher. The challenges remain the same.

Finally, Lesslie the human being: I focus here on his all too human realisation of his disappointments, and these are things I witnessed. I told him of several villages I researched where churches had been founded in his time as Bishop, where he had gone for baptisms and confirmations, which had lapsed back to Hinduism, primarily for lack of teaching and pastoral care. He knew each of them by name, and their story, and his anguish was multiplied. I think of insight that pastors should come from the village, and his bold step to ordain congregational leaders as worker pastors, after appropriate training. I wrote an article in Theology after meeting those he ordained years later- sad and unaffirmed by those bishops who came afterwards. Professionalisation of the clergy sounded the death knell of these village congregations, as they became pastored by over-qualified strangers. I think of a special meeting a number of us had at St Martin's in the Fields, whom he called together to share, late in his life, his agitation about where he saw things going wrong in the leadership of the church he loved so much in South India. I think of his ready response to my and a Muslim colleagues' invitation to come to speak in a mosque, the evening after major riots with two deaths, in Handsworth in the late 80's, and his deep concern for the cohesion of the city he had adopted as his own. I think of his deep personal concern when our daughter was very ill in 1989. He identified with the other, and bore these things personally, there was no detached minister, going through the motions of pastoral care. And of course his identity with Helen and the family, through all the ups and downs of his immensely complex life.

So, I leave with you with this 'Unfinished Agenda', a challenge to us to continue the challenges he left us with, in all these fields. I end with some lines from the poem by Studdert Kennedy he chose for the preface to the book of this title:

It is not finished, Lord.
There is not one thing done;
That is no battle of my life
That I have really won.

And now I come to tell thee
How I fought to fail
My human, all too human, tale
Of weakness and futility.

And yet there is faith in me
That thou wilt find in it
One word that thou canst take
And make
The Centre of a sentence
In Thy book of poetry.

‘Despise not the day of small things.’

Andrew Wingate, December 6th 2009