

The Impossible Mission

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 April 2008

Preacher: The Most Reverend Gregory Venables

[0 : 00] Can I ask you to open your Bibles in the reading we listen to from the Acts of the Apostles, Acts chapter 26, the Acts of the Apostles chapter 26, and would you have your Bible open please at that place.

I want to say first of all that although I consider it an enormous privilege to be here with you today, I'm here with a deep sense of sadness.

Charles Dickens' book, A Tale of Two Cities, begins with the words, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. This is a sad time. And yet unavoidable.

And as I said at the conference this last couple of days, I believe your timing is right. But let us remember that God has called us to love, especially those who don't agree with us.

And those who haven't made the same decision as you've made. And I think that's very, very important. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 reminds us that we can get it right in certain ways, but if we do it without love, it's not worth it.

[1 : 36] So please let's love. And let's be patient. And let's remember that even though God has called us to keep the faith.

And that's, I believe, what we're doing. We have said we cannot give the impression that non-truth is the same as truth.

There is such a thing as truth and there is such a thing as non-truth. And from the very beginning, not just in this post-modern Western society, from the very beginning, the enemy of the gospel has cast doubt on God's word.

From the very beginning, from the very first time when God created human beings and spoke to them, the enemy came and whispered in their ear, did God say?

The word of God has not changed. And Jesus Christ, the word of God has not changed.

[2 : 47] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. If Jesus was the son of God yesterday, he's the son of God today. And yet, that truth was not attacked only now.

It was attacked as soon as Jesus heard his father say to him at his baptism, you are my beloved son. And shortly after that, when our Lord went into the wilderness, that same enemy whispered in his ear, if you are the son of God.

The doubt is always going to be on the word of God and the word of God. When those are changed, when people no longer consider this to be the true word of God, and when people no longer consider Jesus to be the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but by me, that is the time when you have to say, if I don't do something now, I will be giving people the idea that they're alright when they're not alright.

So this is not cultural, this is not a difference of opinion which merits schism, which is always a bad thing. This is separation on the basic truth of the gospel.

And you are not alone. You're not alone. You haven't moved, as I said a few moments ago. You're standing firm with the vast majority of the Anglican Communion.

[4 : 25] But, we have a lot to do. And that's what I want to talk about this morning.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostle tells us how a wonderfully intelligent, cultured, religious man, a brilliant brain, a wonderful student of God's word and God's law, got it wrong.

He got it wrong to the point that even though he knew just about everything that God had said about the coming Messiah, he got it wrong.

They had tradition, they had certain knowledge, but they missed the point. And God in his mercy called Paul.

And he called him to do what he calls you and me to do, which is to get on with the mission of the church. And that is what I want us all to recognize as our first responsibility.

[6 : 11] I don't know what your first aim in life is, but if it's not the mission of the church, then you've got the wrong priority. The mission is not something that's done by one or two passionate people.

The mission of the church has to be done by every Christian. And if you know Jesus, you've got no option but to get on with it. And will you notice please where this mission comes from?

It's not something which Paul developed in his own thinking. It's something God called him to do. It didn't come out of a church council. It didn't come out of a synod. It didn't come out of a parochial meeting.

It came out of the mouth of God. God called Paul to mission. It's something which God has initiated. If there's something we get wrong in our postmodern society, it's that we have everything centered around us. Whatever we do, whatever we are working on, invariably it's about us.

[7 : 27] The word is anthropocentric. But you and I are called to be Christ centered. In other words, your life doesn't begin with you and what you want and what you know and what you want to do.

Your life begins with God and what he wants of you. The big problem of the human race, the problem behind all our problems as the human race, and there are many, just as there are many wonderful things, but our big problem is that we're living in a world created by God as if God does not exist.

Let's get back to God. This doesn't begin with man and woman. This begins with God. In the beginning, God. Build your life around God.

Have him in the first place. The commandment says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, within your strength. That's where you need to be. In love with your creator.

And once you're in love with your creator, then the other things will get sorted out. Paul is not a volunteer. Neither are you. The mission is not done by volunteers like some say, well I'll do the tea, I'll do the coffee, and I'll do the mission.

[8 : 49] You're not a volunteer. God has called you. That means that you are accountable to God for what you do with every hour in the day you live. You're accountable.

Noah did not wake up in the morning and say, I'm going to build a boat. He probably didn't even know what a boat was. Because that's the way God works. God has a sense of humor.

Abraham didn't wake up in the morning and say, hey, I'm going to be the father of the nations. God called him. Moses didn't get up one morning and say, I'm going to lead God's people out of captivity.

God called him. The Virgin Mary didn't get up one morning and say, hey mom, I'm going to be the mother of the Messiah. God called her. And God calls us.

As you look through the history of the church too, you'll see not volunteers, but men and women called by God. And the question is unavoidable. God is calling you.

[9 : 53] How are you responding? When I can avoid it, I get somebody else to answer the phone. For obvious reasons.

Because there are certain people I simply don't want to hear from. When God calls on your mobile, do you listen? When you see that name flash up, Holy Spirit, on your mobile, do you press the ignore button?

And notice too that God calls you personally. Do you know what God calls me? Greg. That's how personal God is.

Because God is concerned about people. God calls you personally. And God is interested in you personally. This is personal.

What does God call this man? Saul. Saul. Of course, he has to call him twice because his mobile was off the first time. And notice too that God calls Paul to do something far beyond his ability.

[11 : 15] Now that is probably why most of us stay where we are. Because we consider that to which we are being called and we think, well, I couldn't do that.

And God says, that's the whole point. That's the whole point. You say to me, I can't do that. And God says, right. Years back when I went to my first primates meeting.

Primates. not big hairy things, you know, that live in trees. They're far more intelligent than us. And I got on my knees and I said, Lord, honestly, I do not know what to do.

And the Lord said, Greg, when you started off on this, when you first said yes to me, sitting on that railway station bench in August 1969 in the southeast of England, did you know what was going to happen?

Did you know what I was going to call you to do? And I said, no, Lord. And the Lord said, Greg, nothing's changed. You might have lost all your hair. You might be a bit older than you were, but it's the same deal.

[12 : 32] I'm calling you to do what you can't do. That's the point. Abraham was called to be the father of the nations. He had a problem. No children.

That's a big problem if you're going to be the father of the nations. Isaiah was called to be a prophet.

He had a big problem. He had a dirty mouth. Mary was called to be the mother of our Lord. She had a big problem. those are the people God calls.

The people that know that what they're being called to do is impossible. I once sat with some of my Indian colleagues in the north of Argentina. We have a very mixed congregation throughout the southern cone.

In Argentina, we've got very, very mixed groups. The Amerindians live in the north of Argentina, and their witchy, Chorote, Dova. I once sat with some of these Indian leaders and I said, do you want me to get someone from outside to help?

[13 : 40] They said, yes. That's about as excited as I get in that part of the world. Then one of them said to me, but no experts, please.

Interesting. We don't want experts. We want those guys who come and sit with us. The ones who come and sit with us.

They're the ones we want. We've had experts. We want people who care. So Paul is called to do things far beyond his ability.

To do that, he has to catch a glimpse of something. God is great. Did you know that? Did you know that God is really great? Did you know that God can do everything God wants to do?

Did you know that? God can do everything he wants to do. That's the meaning of that word omnipotent, isn't it? Don't get tied up with philosophy and philosophical arguments.

[14 : 49] God can do what God wants to do. And God is going to do it anyway, so you might as well walk with him now. And Paul had to learn that God was great.

That's great when you see another preacher writing down what you're saying. You know that's... Oh no, I know what you're writing down. You're writing down your shopping list for tomorrow, aren't you? It's Rico.

He's not an expert, but he's someone who cares. When I left England, I didn't give up drinking tea. You've got to catch a glimpse of God's glory. Do you remember Moses? What a wonderful man Moses is. You're looking forward to meeting him? It's going to be really great.

And he said once to God, because he said it like it is. He said like the Apostle Peter, he said it. He wasn't all full of good taste like so many Anglicans are.

[15 : 59] You know what I mean? He said it and he said, come on God, I want to see your face. And God says, you joking? You look at my face and it will be like a dried leaf in a bonfire.

But I tell you what I'll do. I'll hide you there in the corner. And my glory will pass. And he hid him in the corner. But Moses was, I don't know how to say it in English, astuto.

That's what Argentines are, astute. As God's glory swept past at the last minute, he just peaked. And for the rest of a long period of time, his face shone.

Just caught a little glimpse glory of God. Have you seen the glory of God? One day you're going to see it. God is glorious.

God is great. God is far more than anything. Just think of the things we got excited about. Just think when you went to see the Beatles when you were a kid, you know? Or a teenager as we were.

[17 : 07] You know, you just think you were like, wow! I was watching a movie on the plane the other day about Bobby Dylan and it all came back, you know?

It all came back and I was sitting there thinking, wow, yes. We thought those guys were great. And they weren't, of course, they were just like us, you know?

And yet there was something there, some sort of charisma. Can you imagine what God's glory looks like? Just catch a glimpse of it and then you'll be able to get on with the things to which God is calling you.

God promised him protection. Some people don't want to move because they're scared. And that's right, it's dangerous. My life is dangerous. Mind you, I sometimes think it's more dangerous to live in Canada or the UK, you know?

In another way. In another way. But don't be put off by the danger. Because God has promised protection.

[18 : 16] And God doesn't let you down. God said to Paul, I'll look after you. And if you want to, I won't read it now, it would take too long. But if you want to read in 2 Corinthians, I'm not going to read it now, I promise.

But 2 Corinthians chapter 11, you can read the dangers Paul had to face. And God saved him all the way. And also, God called Paul to be a witness.

Now, that's an interesting word in the Bible, and I'm sure your wonderful rector has told you more than once what the word witness means. Yeah? Martyr.

Now, that martyrdom might come quickly, or it might be long and drawn out. But you're going to be a martyr. So, if I can say it with great politeness, get real about it.

God's called you to die and to get on with it. And until that seed falls in the ground, you won't be able to begin to grow in the way God wants you to. But to die, you've got to get to the end of yourself.

[19 : 32] Now, it might be at the moment your circumstances aren't easy. Well, I wouldn't be surprised if God weren't saying to you, come on, get to the end of your resources and then plug into me.

Get to the end of where you are and what you can do and then plug in. Then we can start doing. As long as you think that you can cope, you've got a problem.

As long as you're sitting in that safe place, you've got a problem. God wants you to get out there.

God wants to get out of your life. And what is this gospel? And I'm just going to give you bullet points and I want you to go on thinking about it afterwards.

Please look at what this gospel is. This gospel is not just a helping hand. And I say it with love and respect. It's not just millennial goals.

They're wonderful. But this gospel isn't just a helping hand, much as we need that. It's not just a reaffirmation, a sort of firm hand on your shoulder saying, you're alright, we need that.

[20 : 41] It isn't just about personal fulfillment and inner healing, even though those things may be a part of it. What's it about?

Look at it. I send you, verse 18, to open their eyes. Now that's offensive in modern culture, isn't it? But you know what the Bible says? Satan has blinded the eyes of the human race. That's why people can't see as it really is.

People can't see because their eyes are shut. Now if that's offensive, that's because this word is offensive. because it tells you the truth about yourself.

My dear friend Terry Chang said something that was so true the other night when we were having supper together. He said, a lot of men don't go to the doctors because they bury their heads in the sand. It's true.

[21 : 42] I'm a prime example. People find this offensive because it tells them the truth. We're blind. God wants to open eyes.

We're called to help people get their eyes open. We're called to help people move from darkness to light.

What's darkness? Living with your eyes shut and ignoring what God has done. What's light? Living in the presence of God. and having God at the center of your life.

From the power of Satan to God. Can you imagine if in some places they started preaching this this morning? I think the congregation would pass out. Yeah?

From the power of Satan to God. Why? Because Satan is the God of this world the Bible tells us. The whole world is in the grip of the evil one.

[22 : 50] That's what the word of God says. That's not me. That's the problem. There's an enemy who is a liar and a murderer.

But the good news is that even though we're dead in trespasses and sin God has done something about it. Do you know the most two most comforting words in scripture?

Ephesians chapter 2. You were dead in your transgression and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

But God. You notice it doesn't say but the theologians or but some very clever church leaders.

But God. it's God who's given us the answer. And what is the answer? That they may receive what?

[23 : 57] Forgiveness of sins. That's where you begin isn't it? Repentance as we prayed this morning and forgiveness of sins. Until you recognize that you have got a problem and there we come to that word that I think is the biggest taboo in this sad situation in which we're living.

You travel where you like within the neoliberal church and you will not hear that terrible word. I went to the Lambeth conference in 1998 a very strange experience 800 and plus bishops all in one place.

You know what the collective noun for bishops is surplus. This strange purple Butlin's holiday camp a sort of ecclesiastical one flew over the cuckoo's nest.

And the one word that was taboo from beginning to end was the word sin. Why?

Because it's an offence. And yet my dear friends without recognising sin you can't go anywhere. Of course God loves us but there's a problem. Sin.

[25 : 19] What is sin? Ignoring and disobeying what God has said. Sound familiar? Nothing's new is it?

It's all been there before. God has spoken and we ignore it. God said you can eat of every tree you like. You can have a party every day. You can have beef every day if you want and Malbec.

Because my doctor says it's good for me. But don't eat of this tree. What did they do? They ate of the tree that they were forbidden.

That's us. Paul said it. I know what I should do. I don't do it. I know what I shouldn't do and I do do it. That's the problem. Who will free me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's where the answer is in Jesus. Nothing else can free you from your sin. Pills, booze, philosophy can change your perception but it can't change your reality.

[26 : 26] Only Jesus can change who you are. And that's what he wants to do. The gospel transforms you from the inside out. The day of Pentecost.

What shall we do? Repent and be baptized. That's the gospel. And that's what it's our job to preach. And you say to me, yeah well I'm afraid today it's a bit too offensive that. And you know the answer? It always was offensive. It always was offensive. I was once doing a television program and the news live and the news guy said to me, do you know because of what you're saying a lot of my friends don't want to go to church anymore.

I said, so you surprise me. I said, they crucified Jesus because he said it. When was Christianity popular?

Well, when was Christianity popular? They killed his followers because they preached it. So what's new? Guy just stared at me with his mouth open.

[27 : 40] As I left the studio, the director came over to me and said, can you come back sometime? I said, do you believe it? He said, no but it makes good television. a place among those who are sanctified.

What does it mean to be sanctified? Sanctified means to be set apart. On the 12th of September 1970, when Sura and I stood before the altar, I call it, what do you call it?

The holy table? Yeah, yeah. When we stood there, she said, I'm for you. And I said, I'm for you.

That's sanctification.

That's sanctification, being set apart for life. That's why, my dear friends, marriage is far more than a social convenience.

It's the image of what it means to be a Christian. the relationship between man and wife is an image of the relationship between the church and Jesus Christ.

[28 : 57] That's why it's holy. And that's why you can't play games with it. It's not just about morality. It's about what God has done.

Marriage is holy. Why is it holy? Because God sets us apart. Sanctified by faith in me.

Who's me? Jesus. There's only one Jesus. There's not a lot of Jesuses with different names.

There's one Jesus and he's the same Jesus.

And he's always going to be the same Jesus. And one day you're going to see him face to face.

What is it that stops some people in the church getting excited about this?

What is it that stops some people in the church getting excited about this? Looking at my dear friend Bishop Malcolm. What I love about Bishop Malcolm is he's excited about Jesus. You always were, weren't you?

[30 : 09] we can't keep you down can we? Praise the Lord brother. Because when you love it just transforms everything.

You're in love with Jesus. I hope so. But you've got to go and do it. You know John's Gospel chapter 22 and verse 1.

John, the Gospel of John chapter 22 verse 1. Oh, you haven't got it in your Bible. It's apocryphal but it's good.

Jesus arrives in heaven and they have a party with good Argentine beef and good Argentine wine. Because there's going to be plenty of that in heaven the Lord's told me. And while the party's going on one of the little angels comes over and goes up to Jesus and says, hi Jesus give me five.

[31 : 25] And Jesus gives him five. And then the little angel says, so what happens now Lord? And Jesus says, well, they're going to get on with it now. The mission. And the angel says, who Lord?

And Jesus said, well you know. And the angel says, are we talking about the same people I think we're talking about? And Jesus says, right, Peter, John, James.

And the little angel, who's very smart as they are, said, so what's plan B? And the Lord said, there is no plan B.

That's our great privilege. May the Lord give us the courage and the joy and the love and the enthusiasm to get on with it.

Amen. Let's pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, fill us full with your word and with your fire and with your love.

[32 : 43] Fill us full, Lord, with that wonderful word that you've given us, that we might be transformed in our minds, darkness, that you might speak into our darkness and speak into our confusion so that we can begin to identify truth as against lies.

Fill us with your fire, Lord, that your fire might burn up all the secondary things in us, Lord, so that we can be that light that you call us to be. And fill us with your love, Lord, that we might do it the way you want us to do it, Lord.

Help us to love not just those that agree with us. Help us to love those that don't agree with us and help us to love them in such a way that whatever they think about us, they will be challenged by that love.

And Lord, I pray your blessing on this precious congregation with its precious leadership, Lord, that you will both protect and inspire so that in the coming days, your church will not just continue to preach your word faithfully and to share this wonderful gospel, but to do it more and more until the whole world is filled with your glory, Lord.

Let it be. In the name of Jesus. Amen. continuing in prayer, I will leave a few moments of silence between particular prayers for you to speak to the Lord in the quietness of your own hearts.

[34 : 33] heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have been leading and guiding us as a church family, most especially during the last six years, that you have responded to our prayers for help and brought us faithful shepherds in the persons of Bishop Harvey, Bishop Harding, and our primate, Archbishop Venables.

Protect them and their families and give them your wisdom and strength as they serve you. Father, we thank you that you have connected us to a larger family here in Canada.

we uphold the congregations in the Anglican Network in Canada and also those Anglican Christians in the province of the Southern Cone who have reached across the world to include us in their fellowship.

Thank you, Father, for your provision for us in so many ways. Thank you. Father, you created each one of us and you know us completely.

You know our hearts and you love us. We pray that we will receive this wonderful love and rest in it.

As we read your word and are reminded of your saving grace through your son, Jesus, and as we listen to your voice, may we be prepared to share your love with others and obey your call in our lives.

[36 : 37] Lord, we pray for our upcoming mission that your Holy Spirit may hover over each planned event, bringing those who search for you, touching hearts to be open to your grace and mercy.

we ask for health and safety for Rico as he travels, and we commit every detail of this mission to you. Father, we lift up our country Canada and give thanks for the freedom and peace we know in this land.

be with those who lead governments federally, provincially, and in our city of Vancouver. Cause them, we pray, to walk before you in truth and righteousness, fulfilling their office to your glory and the public good.

and as we look beyond our borders, we lift up the plight of people in Zimbabwe, Father, and we pray for the just and peaceful resolution of their election.

restoration of the peace in Burundi and restoration of order there. heavenly father, we remember those who are known to us, who are ill, who are recovering from surgery, or facing difficult life situations.

[38 : 54] At this time, we lift up the following to you, Jesus, for your healing touch. We pray for Rosemary, Rowena, Fiona, Barbara, Irwin, and Johanna.

and now, Father, we take a few moments to bring before you those things in our own hearts that press in on us.

Amen. Amen.

As we close our time of prayer, Father, we are so thankful to you for all your gifts so freely bestowed on us. Fill our hearts with all joy and peace in believing through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.