

MISSIO SUNDAY

Today we celebrate at least two important dates, but thankfully they merge into one. The oldest date to recall, as we celebrate this Mass, is 1822 which saw the founding of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, better known simply as the APF. This great movement in the Church, like so many, was started by a woman, Pauline Jaricot, from Lyon in France. From the age of 15 she wanted to make the love of God known to the whole world. She established the APF with a small group of her friends in order to support the French missionary priests travelling to Asia. Her movement built up, like so many do, in the form of small cells of young people, based largely among the women working in the mills of Lyon, who prayed and gave small amounts of money in support of missionary work.

This initiative has come into the lives of so many of us, reaching our homes, in the form of the Red Boxes. They have long been a focus of prayer and generosity, a constant reminder of a simple part we can all play in a much greater story.

The Red Boxes first appeared in 1905 as an expression of the work of the Mill Hill Missionaries, founded by Cardinal Vaughan in 1866. But the way was prepared by the establishment of the APF in this country in 1837. Now two streams were in full flow, the APF with Fr Tom Jackson's red boxes, and the Mill Hill Missionaries, with an extensive mission-aid organisation, also collecting support in prayer and funds among the Catholic parishes.

The anniversary we celebrate today is that of the decision of the Bishops of England and Wales to ask the APF and the Mill Hill Missionaries to work together in a partnership to simplify and strengthen missionary appeal in England and Wales. This they did in 1935, 75 years ago. So we celebrate today a unique partnership – with Mill Hill taking care of the mission appeals and education and the APF responsible for parish organisation and collections. And more recently a new look has been given to all this work with the single, new title of Missio.

Today we thank God for all who have had a part in this remarkable story and ask God's blessing on its future.

Writing for today's World Mission Sunday, Pope Benedict emphasised that the gift of our faith, which we cherish so much, is never an exclusive possession of those who have received it, but always a gift to be shared. This, of course, is rooted in the very intention of the Father, who sent his Son into our world to restore us to what we should be and to bring us to what we were made for. In Christ we find our way and truth and life: that transforming of our hearts and minds by grace such that we find our way day by day in response to his truth and love, and such that we live in the promise of eternal glory when, together with all this created world, we will be brought to a final fulfilment beyond our furthest imaginings. Indeed the words chosen by Pope Benedict to guide our thoughts today are the simple, memorable phrase: 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.' May those words find a dwelling place in our hearts and resound constantly in our thoughts, our words, our actions. 'As the Father sent me,' said Jesus, 'so I am sending you.'

St Paul understood this missionary imperative. Indeed the faith he had received from God was unintelligible without it. Faith was to be proclaimed. And the second reading, from the First Letter to the Thessalonians, illustrates this well.

This letter is probably the first of the texts of the New Testament to be committed to paper. It comes, then, from our origins, and still has its freshness as it is proclaimed to us this morning. And its destiny – Thessalonica – is hugely important.

In deciding to go to Macedonia, and Thessalonica, – in response to that vision – St Paul was stepping into the heart of the world of his time. He was stepping into the kingdom of Alexander the Great, who had conquered the known world and wept because there were no more worlds left to conquer. This was so not because Alexander was simply a military conqueror. He had a different desire. He believed that he had been sent by God ‘to unite, to pacify and to reconcile the world’, ‘to marry east to the west’ with a dream of an empire in which there was neither Greek nor Jew, barbarian or Scythian, slave or freeman. Indeed, the names of the cities we associate with St Paul ring with the memory of him: Alexandria; Thessalonica, named after his half-sister, Philippi, named after his father, Philip. As he crossed over to Macedonia, then, Paul must surely have thought not of a country nor of a continent, but of a world to be won for Christ.

And Thessalonica was a famous harbour and a free city, never having been occupied, but also it was place on the Via Egnatia, the Egnatian Road, which stretched from the Adriatic to the Constantinople on the Bosphorus and on to Asia and the East. East and West converged on Thessalonica. Its reach was to the whole world.

So the few words we have heard from Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians resonate with a vibrant energy, one which we must seek for today, too. And this is not a complicated business. It is the witness of Paul’s own life which had been effective and, he tells us, the witness of the life of the new Christians in Thessalonica which has become ‘a great example.’ He then adds these words: ‘since it was from you that the word of the Lord started to spread – and not only through Macedonia and Achaia, for the news of your faith in God has spread everywhere.’ In fact this is a rather feeble translation, for the original uses a much stronger word than ‘spread’. It speaks rather of the faith of the Thessalonians ‘sounding forth like a trumpet’ using a word that could also mean ‘crashing out like a roll of thunder.’ Now that’s more challenging!

And Paul also tells us what lies at the heart of this emboldened proclamation: the Thessalonians ‘broke with idolatry’ and are ‘now waiting for Jesus, his Son, whom he raised from the dead.’ It is faith and hope which drive us on: faithful trust, not in the idols of the age – whatever they may be, and there are plenty of them in our lives – and sure hope that our future in the Lord is absolutely secure, even if our present is full of uncertainty and confusion.

Faith, hope and of course, love: the ‘greatest and the first of the commandments’. May these three be renewed in us today as we ask God to refresh in our hearts a new thankfulness for this great gift of knowing Christ Jesus and a new desire to let his name be known and his gifts received throughout the world. May God bless every gift of Missio and all who contribute in this way to the great mission of the Church today.

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