

Being sent on the mission.

It is a great pleasure for me to be back here in Assisi. Please forgive my terrible Italian. I am ashamed of it! I would like to talk about how we can share our faith with our contemporaries. Usually we associate this with talking about the gospel. As a member of the Order of Preachers, this is how I spend much of my time. But how many sermons do you remember? Perhaps even more important that what we say is how we are the Body of Christ. St Teresa of Avila said:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now.

So I want to look at how we are sent to make Christ's face, and ears, and mouth and hands present today.

The Face

Let's begin with the face. When you love someone, the most important thing is that they smile at you. I remember as a shy teenager, desperately hanging around a girl with whom I was infatuated, hoping that she would just notice that I existed and give me a smile. If she looked through me, then I felt that I did not exist. And if she made her face into a hard, mask, then I was devastated. She fell in love with a soldier and I became a Dominican!

One day at a party for the Archbishop I heard a penetrating voice saying: 'That is the first man I ever kissed.' I knew that I had made a good decision to join the Order! Once I went to a party organised to welcome our Archbishop. There she was at the other side of the room. And I heard her say in a loud voice, pointing at me: 'That was the first man that I ever kissed.' And then I realised that I had made a good choice to become a Dominican!

This is how Israel was with God. They just wanted God to smile at them. 'Let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.' (Psalm 80.3). When we think of salvation, then it maybe in terms of being let off punishment and having sins forgiven. But for the Old Testament, it was more human. It was God looking at us with love. The oldest Biblical text is a bit of leather on which is written these words: 'May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6. 24 – 26). When someone looks lovingly, then we can rest in that smile.

God's face became flesh in the face of Jesus. He spotted all the people who needed that smile. He saw little Zacchaeus up the tree and smiled on him; he saw Levi waiting in the crowd at his tax office and he called him. There are millions of people who feel invisible and

just want to be seen. In Lima, there was a photographic exhibition of street kids, and underneath a photo of a desolate kid was written: one of them was written *Saben que existo, pero no me ven*. They know that I exist but they do not see me. Simone Weil said, ‘Love sees what is invisible.’

When we smile at someone, we show their value to everyone else. Raimund Gaiti is an Australian philosopher. When he was seventeen he had a job as a ward assistant in a psychiatric hospital in Australia. The patients had lost all signs of human intelligence and dignity. Many of the doctors and nurses were professional, decent people who talked of the inalienable dignity of these sick people. Then a nun came to visit them. He was bowled over by how she related to the patients. Her smile and words was extraordinary ‘for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose afflictions had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behaviour.’ He remarks that prison guards will see prisoners in a new way when they have seen them with people who love them. Children learn to love their brothers and sisters because they see that their parents look at them with love.

Love longs for the smile to be returned. And that is the beauty and the risk of mission. Will anyway smile back? In Oxford, where I live, there are a lot of beggars, and they try to catch your eye. Do we look back? One day I was taken to visit a vast rubbish tip outside Kingston, Jamaica, which was the home to the most destitute people. And I spotted a sort of primitive shack, almost a big cardboard box. And when I was near a mother and her young son emerged. They invited me inside, and offered me a Coke they had, I assumed, found on the tip, and her son offered to swop T shirts. I was deeply moved. I kept that T shirt for years. It seems to have rather shrunk and I can no longer get into it. It was not just that I saw them, but they saw me, I existed in their eyes, was invited into their home. Even if for a brief moment, they invited me to be their brother.

So that is our first mission, to offer God’s loving look. God takes pleasure in people. God delights in them, which is why they exist at all. We must learn to be the face of God rejoicing in people. Next we must learn how to hear with the ears of Jesus. We must be his ears today.

The ears

We usually think of preachers as people who talk. They stand in pulpits and tell people what is what. But there is no preaching of the gospel until one has listened. When people come to Jesus he usually gets them to talk first. He does not thrust the gospel down their throats, but wants to discover what they want. When blind Bartimaeus comes to him Jesus says, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ He might have thought that it was obvious. The man can’t see. Quick miracle. Zap, and let’s carry on. But no! Jesus wants to hear from this man himself what he wants. He responds to our desires. So the lepers come and ask to be healed, and the disciples ask to be taught how to pray. Jesus listens.

We are not sales people marketing God as the answer to everything. We start where people are and with what they want. That maybe just a bit of company, or someone to get stuff for them when they are ill or someone to hold their hand. But if we respond to what they want,

then slowly they may come to discover their deepest desires, which are for God. Let them take their time.

Listening to people is one of the greatest arts in the world. You have to hear how they are using words, which may not be as you use the same words. When I arrived in Rome, I drafted a Letter to the Order. I gave it to my vicar, who was American, and awaited his reaction in fear and trembling. He returned it saying, 'It's quite good.' I almost tore it up. Then I discovered some months later than in American British, 'quite good' means 'excellent.' In British English it means, pretty bad. So please do not come to me after this lecture and say that it is quite good. I got an email from the Ivory Close the other day, which addressed me as 'Dear slut'. I wondered what they knew about me! It was only when I read that they said that they had got my email address from 'the slut Provincial' that I guessed that in their dialect, the word might mean something different!

Sometimes we are afraid to listen because we are disturbed by what they say. Or we might be afraid because we have no idea what we can say in reply. When I was a very young and inexperienced university chaplain, a beautiful young student came to me to have a very personal conversation. Most of it centred on her rather exotic sex life. Above all I was so nervous about what I might say when she stopped talking that I virtually stopped listening. And so when she stopped, I did indeed have nothing to say! If we really listen, with all our imagination, with all our openness of mind and heart, then God will give us something to say.

Forgive me if I name drop. I cannot resist it. I promise not to do it again, except tomorrow! Once when I had to welcome Pope John Paul II to one of our universities, I memorised a bit of Polish. When I had finished, he completed the phrase. And then I said in Italian, 'I hope that my Polish pronunciation is better than my Italian.' And he replied as quick as a flash: 'If the heart is open, the minds understands.' So we have to listen with an intelligent heart, or you might say with loving mind.

If we are really self-absorbed, then we will not hear what the other person says. Noel Coward, the English playwright, once met a friend after many years and he said to him: 'There is not time to talk about both of us, and so let's talk about me.' Listening is a spiritual discipline. You have open yourself to another person. Dominique Pire was a Belgian Dominican who received the Nobel Prize after the Second World War for his peace work. He used to say: 'One must be ready to fill oneself with the other. Do I dare to listen to someone who has different ideas than mine? Do I dare to listen to someone who might challenge me? People were afraid to listen to Jesus sometimes, but he was never afraid to listen to anyone.

So we have smiled and we have listened, and now we may be ready to speak. We are God's mouth.

The Mouth

This is where many of us become nervous. What have I got to say? When I was a Dominican novice, I was astonished that my fellow novices were impatient to start preaching. I dreaded the time. I felt that I did not know anything, and that I would be paralysed by nerves. I had so

many questions and doubts. I loved to study, but I was terrified of the fact that one day I would have to open my mouth. You might think that I was therefore stupid to join the Order of Preachers! It was like, as they say, a turkey voting for Christmas! Assuming that I am not the only one to have these worries, let's address them one by one.

Jesus is the Word of God. The Word of God is not primarily about communicating facts. God speaks his Word and things come to be. God says 'let there be light' and it is. Let there be squirrels, even 'let there be Timothy Radcliffe', and we all are. Jesus as the Word of God speaks words to people that heal them, that welcome them, that build them up and sometimes confront them.

All day long we are chatting, exchanging jokes, texting, blogging, sharing the news, moaning about the boring lecturer, gossiping. Speaking is the most important human activity. And the biggest moral issue is this: do we offer people life-giving words that build them, that value them and cherish them. Or do we offer nasty words that accuse and undermine, that denigrate people. Do we offer God's Word, which is creative? Or do we offer Satan's word which is destructive and subversive? Do we rubbish people?

The story is told of a rabbi who was driven mad by a woman in the synagogue who was always gossiping about everyone, spreading nasty stories. And so one day he took her to the top of a high tower and asked her to empty the contents of a pillow. And the feathers drifted all over the town. And then he said, 'Now go and collect all the feathers.' And she replied, 'Rabbi, that is impossible; they are everywhere.' And he said 'It is the same with your nasty words.'

So if we are to be the mouth of Jesus today, then we first have to speak words that cherish and reverence people, especially the people whom other people rubbish and who feel on the edge and despised for it is these are God's friends.

But what about my doubts and questions? I may feel that I do not know much about my faith, and maybe I wonder if I believe all of it anyway? Do I have to pretend to believe? When people say things very loudly and insistently, and with deep sincerity, that is when you begin to suspect that they might not believe it deep down!

When Jesus sent the disciples to go and preach to the end of the world at the end of Matthew's gospel, it is said that 'some doubted.' I love that. There they are on the mountain, faced with the Risen Lord, and some were still not sure. But Jesus sent them anyway! In John's gospel, the first preacher is the woman at the well. She is a woman with a bad reputation. She had lived with five men. She was probably regarded as a whore. And she was filled with doubts and questions about this strange man Jesus. But she is the first preacher. And the first person to confess the divinity of Jesus is Thomas the Doubter. He resists believing in the Resurrection. He wants proof. He wants to put his hands in the side of Jesus. But it is this doubting, questioning man who first says to Jesus: 'My Lord and my God.'

So when we go to speak of our faith, some of us may have uncertainties, and queries, and unresolved issues. And that is fine! Because then people will see that being a Catholic does

not mean that we have got all the answers. Cardinal Kaspar from the Vatican said that the Church would have much more authority if sometimes it said more often: 'I do not know.'

The greatest teacher of Christianity was the Dominican, St Thomas Aquinas. I am, of course, perfectly objective! He loved the text, 'Call no one Master. There is only one Master, who is in heaven.' When I was Master of the Order, I noticed that people seemed to especially love that text. It appeared with suspicious frequency in the readings. None of us are masters. We accompany people as we learn, sharing their questions and puzzlement. We walk with each other, thinking together. We reason as we search.

I am reminded of one of my brethren, Herbert McCabe. It is said that when he was six years old, his mother reprimanded him for some naughty deed. She said, 'Now you have been a very wicked boy. It is so bad that it might even be a mortal sin.' And young Herbert is supposed to have replied, 'Mother, it is impossible. I cannot commit a mortal sin until I have attained the age of reason. According to the Church I have not done so at the age of six. Your reasoning is therefore faulty.'

But let me put in a good word for doctrine. There is a vast doctrinaire prejudice against doctrine in our society. It is assumed that doctrines stop you thinking. Children accept doctrines. Grown people think for themselves. Doctrines make people intolerant of other beliefs. It is conflicting doctrines that are driving religious people to kill each other in Israel, Iraq and Pakistan. Let's drop dogma and go for something nice and friendly like spirituality!

But true doctrine never closes down your mind. It always pushes us towards the mystery. True doctrine is an endless adventure into the mystery of God. G. K. Chesterton talked of the adventure of orthodoxy. We are baptised into the mystery of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Though there was an ancient and venerable Irish Dominican called Cardinal Michael Brown. He had been Master of the Order and papal theologian. When he was a child he had been baptised in emergency by an ancient nun. So he tracked her down in order to thank her. She said, 'Your Eminence, it was a great honour for me to baptise you in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' Suddenly he thought: if I was never properly baptised, then I could not be ordained and am not even a Cardinal!

The doctrines of the Trinity, and the Divinity of Christ, the Resurrection are utterly exciting. When I was a young Dominican in the crazy sixties, and when everything seemed to be falling apart, one reason I stayed was because my brethren taught me the utter excitement, the brilliance and wonder of doctrine.

Not all of us have the vocation to be teachers or doctrine. Some of us will be the mouth of Jesus in other ways, perhaps even more fundamental ways, by speaking words that heal and give life. But we do need people who spend several years immersing themselves in theology so as to keep alive our great doctrines.

So we have looked at how we can be God's face, God's ears and God's mouth. Now we come to the most important and human sense of all, which is touch.

Touch

Jesus went around touching people. He touched the bodies of the sick. He touched lepers. He touched even the dead, which would have made him ritually impure. He was perfectly at ease with being touched too. Remember that woman who had probably been a prostitute. He let her wash his feet, and dry them with her hair. I find the idea of having someone dry my feet with their hair rather odd and unattractive. But Jesus was at ease in his body and with the bodies of other people. Why was touching so important?

St Thomas Aquinas, our great teacher, said that it was the most human of senses. Eagles see better than we do. Compared with dogs we have hardly got noses worth talking about. Bats hear things that we cannot hear. I said this in Brisbane Cathedral last summer, and everyone stood up and cheered. I had not realised that the nickname of the archbishop, who was presiding at the Mass, was Bats! And so when I said that Bats heard things we don't everyone was delighted, including the Archbishop. But touch is the really human sense. When you really love someone, then your first desire is to touch them.

Why is it such a part of loving? Because when you love, then touch is always mutual. When you touch someone you love, then they touch you. You can see or hear without being seen or heard. You can smell without being smelt, at least by human beings. But you cannot touch without being touched.

That is why abusive touch, or unloving touch, is so awful, because it destroys the essence of touch, which is mutuality. Gandhi refused to let the lowest caste in Hinduism be called the 'untouchables.' Of course, it meant that others would not let themselves be touched by them. Compassion gives us a heart of flesh. It means that we wish to reach out and touch people whom others reject.

Last year the Dalai Lama came to visit my community of Blackfriars, to take part in a discussion about contemplation in our different traditions. Paul Murray, the Irish Dominican, gave a wonderful paper, and there was a Carmelite. And the Dalai Lama responded. We did not resolve our differences, but we listened to each other with open ears. But what leapt across the divisions was not what the Dalai Lama said, but what he did. A friend of the community was there in a wheelchair. She has been paralysed by a terrible stroke. And when the Dalai Lama came in he paused by her wheelchair, and rested his cheek on hers in silence. He spent longer with her than anyone else. It was the embodiment of compassion.

When I became involved a little bit in work with people with Aids in the early eighties, I discovered the importance of touch. My community organised a conference on the Church

and Aids, and we were overwhelmed by the response. Doctors, nurses, chaplains, people with aids and their friends all wanted to come. It was early days. Most of us had never met anyone with Aids. We were a little bit nervous of how we might catch it. But at the final Mass, a young man called Benedict who had Aids came up to me for the kiss of peace. And when I hugged him I thought, 'this is the body of Christ, needing a hug today.' In Christ, God came and touched us. God is in touch with us even to this day. We must share that touch.

Because our society is so worried about risk, and because of the fears of sexual abuse, we have become nervous about touch. The worries are certainly justified. There has been much abusive and destructive touching which has deeply hurt people. But we must recover recovering this most human and most Christian way of being the Body of Christ. We shall deeply deprive each other, and seem to undo the Incarnation if we keep our distance all the time, when God has drawn near.

At the end of Mass, we are told, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' We are sent to preach the gospel. We are not sent like sales representatives flogging a new product. We are not sent out competitively, to beat the opposition. We are sent to be Christ's body. To be his mouth and hands and ears and face. And we are sent to discover Christ there in the faces of those whom we meet.