



Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on 19th July 2026

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-4a, 5-6; Romans 8:12-15; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Forgive me if you've heard me tell this story before, because I know I've told it several times in different sermons and places and I may have done it here, but it seems to fit. I once heard Desmond Tutu preach in St Albans abbey at a time before the end of apartheid in South Africa and he had only at the last moment, been able to get a visa to leave and the cathedral was packed to the doors with people who desperately wanted to see and hear him, many of whom were more politically active in the struggle against apartheid than had any especial religious affiliation or interest.

I'm sure he was aware of that and he might have been forgiven for taking the opportunity to rail against the injustices of the regime and plead for increased political action and pressure but didn't, instead he preached a sermon which began with the words, which I still remember clearly, 'It is a wonderful thing to belong to the church of Jesus Christ'.

If someone says that today there are likely to be many who might respond with various degrees of cynicism for various reasons which I won't rehearse and we might wonder how he could say that with such a powerful sense of affirmation and the reason was, I have come to believe, that he and his church and the people among whom they lived had become a focus for prayer and support in a variety of ways from churches of virtually all flavours around the world. What he was experiencing was effectively the power of a worldwide church united, buoying him and the church of which he was part up and energising the mission that they were engaged in.

Which surely helps us to understand the value, even the necessity, of a body such as the Council for World Mission (CWM), which can trace its roots back to the earlier work of the mission agencies of the 19th and 20th centuries and to which members of our two constituent congregations contributed. Those who served through the London Missionary society or the Congregational Council for World Mission in different parts of the world. In the Gibson Hall there is a list of missionaries who were members of St Columba's with the countries in which they served.

Of course it is possible to analyse some of that work from our 21st century perspective, critically, in terms of what we may describe as patriarchal colonialism and to question all kinds of aspects of what was done ... but the point is that the formation of CWM out of those earlier bodies shows that it is possible to learn from the past and for the original vision of mission that existed to be re-visioned. The fact that CWM will mark its 50th anniversary next year as a partnership now of 36 churches across the world is a testament to that learning and re-visioning and that we do not re-envision once and then stop because that can then lead to a sense of having arrived and running the risk of allowing new prejudices and stereotypes to become fixed in place. Re-visioning is always a dynamic process.

It might be possible to turn this into a history lesson, especially concerning the developments in the 20th century and the subtle changes of name that happened and the shift in thinking about mission that is represented by them and it is indeed an interesting story that repays careful reading. But I'm not going to attempt that; you can find it on the CWM website and the website address was in the weekly news <https://www.cwmission.org>

When we do read that history, we find that there is a thread running through it which is about recognising two things that almost paradoxically sit side by side. One is the list of mistakes, as they came to be seen, where, for example, collaboration with colonialism happened and western cultural values were confused with Christian values and then imposed in one way or another.

The other are the stories of utter selflessness and sacrificial care and generosity that so many missionaries exhibited and which was experienced and recognised and has been the real communicator of the Christian message. There are many graves of, for example missionary doctors, who literally gave their lives in working to treat disease and then succumbing themselves to the disease that they were working to cure.

It's that kind of history which has made it possible to enter into the new pattern of partnership where the gifts and strengths of each other's churches and traditions can be valued and shared.

There is a principle of mutual affirmation that lays at the heart of all of this and which, perhaps unexpectedly, is one that can be found in that passage from Matthew's gospel, the story of the wheat and the weeds. That story talks of someone deliberately planting weeds in amongst the wheat but the real point of the story is about ensuring that the wheat flourishes which means focussing on the wheat and what it needs and not getting too obsessed with the weeds or to translate it to our experience of partnership, to focus on the gifts and strengths and the attitudes and actions that can build cooperation in mission and can be woven together into newer and stronger tapestries and not to become obsessed with the baggage that might still keep us apart. Yes, recognise the past but learn from what it teaches in order to build the future.

Listening to one another's experiences and challenges and being prepared to stand alongside one another and give support and help and to physically travel to do that face to face and shoulder to shoulder is also so important.

One element of today's service which it hasn't been possible to include was input from one of our own members who has recently come back from a CWM visit to New Zealand. She had hoped to be able to share her experiences of meeting people and sharing their stories but due to a family illness she's not able to be here. I have read her reflections on that journey and it will be most valuable to be able to hear her story on another occasion. I'm reminded of another mission agency that had made a similar journey into partnership to that of CWM and which adopted the phrase 'People to People' as its tag line. That is so important in these days of virtual meeting and perhaps also worth remembering that one of the first Christian heresies was one which believed that Jesus had not come in the flesh but as we might say now, was a kind of virtual image projected from heaven. Incarnation is at the heart of it.

As our prayers of intercession will remind us, and as we saw in our sharing together exercise, one of the aspects of the life of CWM is that it exists in different world regions where the context and needs are similar on one level and can be quite different on another.

The Cook Islands in the Pacific are one of those areas made up of low lying atolls and are increasingly threatened by rising sea levels due to climate change. Cyclones also wreak a great deal of damage.

When we come to our prayers, we will also learn CWM is also asked specifically to pray today for the church in the state of Manipur in North India where there has been, where the church is in a place of violent conflict.

We can think too of the challenges facing churches in, for example, Hong Kong and the relationship with the state, or Myanmar with all that we know of the situation there.

Each church in each area and country faces different challenges but what we celebrate is the fact that in the church of Jesus Christ, we face those challenges in partnership with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God is with us; God reminds his people that they are never alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen