May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

I am in the middle of reading a fascinating book about a subject that, hitherto, I knew nothing about. Now I'm not wont to inflict my reading material on you from the pulpit on a regular basis but this time I want to because it has a direct bearing on today's gospel reading and the theme of today's service – more of that shortly.

The book is by a man called Giles Milton who has developed a series of books which tell little known historical stories in a very readable style. Some of you may have read Nathaniel's Nutmeg which tells the story of the development of the spice island trades or Big Chief Elizabeth which narrates the early development of the British Colonies in Elizabethan times. Milton has a knack of unearthing little known narratives from the 16 th , 17 th and 18 th centuries, which tell a national or international historical story from the very personal standpoint of people who were involved.

His latest book is called White Gold and it tells the story of the white slave trade in North Africa from the middle of the 17 th century through to the middle of the 18 th . For that 100 year period, the Mediterranean and much of the Atlantic was terrorised by the Barbary pirates.

These were North African mariners who raided European shipping and European coastal towns stealing anything they could and also taking Europeans captive to be sold as slaves in Morocco , Algeria and Tunisia . In that time more than one million Europeans were taken as slaves. It's worth keeping that number in mind when we think of today's trials and tribulations with Muslim terrorist groups. We tend to have very short historical memories and think of today's problems as being the worst ever. Believe me, compared to 1705, 2005 feels pretty calm.

Milton brings this story to life by telling it through the eyes of one captive English slave, one Thomas Pellow. Pellow was a Cornish boy whose parents were not at all keen on his going to sea. One of the reasons for their reticence was actually the Barbary Pirates who for decades had not only attacked Cornish shipping but had regularly raided Cornish coastal towns like Looe. Worse still, at one point they had taken over Lundy Island , raised the Islamic standard and then used it as a base to attack towns like Padstow and Ifracombe. It's hard for us to now imagine these sleepy holiday towns as being in the front line of the war of terror but that's precisely what they were.

Pellow, however, ignored his parents concerns and at the age of 11 set off in his uncle's ship for his first taste of life at sea, travelling to Genoa to trade. On the return leg, they were captured by Moroccan pirates and found themselves some months later being sold as slaves in the Moroccan capital, Meknes . Pellow was luckier than most in that his age and intelligence meant that he avoided the murderous work and conditions that killed the vast majority of slaves within their first year and he was retained by the ruling family.

One of the things that comes out very clearly from the book is the enormous enmity that existed between Muslims and Christians. This had existed in a pretty well unbroken line for 500 years since the days of the Crusades and it still, of course, exists today. The Christian ambition was to convert the heathen Muslim who were thought no better than savages and the Muslim ambition was to convert the heathen Christian who were thought no better than savages.

The white slave trade was held up by Christians as an example of the barbarity of the Muslims whilst conveniently forgetting the fact that at the same time the trade in African slaves to the European colonies was just getting into its stride. No-one in Europe would have even thought to link these two events.

One of the things that the Moroccan slave owners would continually have as an ambition was the conversion of their Christian slaves to Islam. This was achieved through a combination of carrot and stick. Pellow himself suffered months of brutal torture before converting on the promise of an easier life.

Interestingly, the Christian dogma that was at the heart of the matter between Christian and Muslim was the one that we are celebrating today, the doctrine of the Trinity. Muslims believed absolutely in the single divinity of God and so rejected totally the concept of the Trinity. They also believed, of course, that Jesus was great prophet but no more than that. Any suggestion that Jesus was part of the Godhead was to them a great sacrilege.

You will all be familiar, I'm sure, with the derogatory gesture that has passed into folklore as the Harvey Smith, involving the use of two fingers in a reverse of Churchill's victory sign. The Americans have further abbreviated this to the use of just one finger to imply the same meaning, but if you were a Christian 300 years ago looking to taunt a Muslim enemy then the worst thing you could do was to give him a three fingered salute. The three fingers represented the Trinity, an absolute denial of the Muslim's fundamental beliefs.

So what has all this got to do with today's reading. Well apart from the issue of the Trinity that we've just discussed, the reading we heard was the very end of Matthew's gospel. It was the point that Matthew has been building up to for all 28 chapters – it was the Great Commission. Here was Jesus leaving his disciples for the final time, leaving all of us on earth for the final time and giving us his parting instructions. We think of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit as the birth of the Church but today, Trinity Sunday is almost like the Confirmation of the church – when we are given clear instructions as to what it is we are required to do.

We often grapple with Mission statements for the church, debating what our priorities should be and it struck me reading that passage again what a waste of time that is when Matthew has written it out for us, recording what Jesus himself told us:-

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

This is our mission statement as a church, it's our instruction, our commission – the Great Commission. Why, then do we have such trouble with it in this day and age. We have a constant internal battle as to whether, today, the Great Commission is politically acceptable. We struggle to reconcile the Great Commission with the Great Commandment – to love our neighbour as ourselves.

If we are to truly love our neighbour, and our neighbour happens to be Agnostic, or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu, shouldn't the Great Commandment of love mean that we should accept that person for what they are and nor try to change them by imposing our views as Christians on them. Shouldn't the Great Commandment take precedent over the Great Commission?

Part of the problem here is the baggage of our history. Mission and missionaries have got a bad name I'm afraid. We have a history of wars of religion; Christian against Jew, Jew against Muslim, Muslim against Hindu and pretty much any other combination you want to choose. In every case, and it continues today, the motivation is misguided mission.

I'm indebted to John Purdey for some writings that I think bring out the issue very clearly. It is vital that, when we think of mission, we dispel any notion that we may have that we are engaging in mission because we have the truth or that what we have is superior to what others know and believe. The energy of mission comes from obedience to Christ's call and from our willingness to be the agents of God's purpose to have mercy on all – it does not issue from our intention to do something good for God.

Where the latter view has prevailed – the view that we have something superior, some sort of superior truth – there have been wars of religion. This view amongst Christians led to the Inquisition and the Holocaust. Amongst Muslims it led to the torture of slaves to force their conversion as happened to the unfortunate Thomas Pellow.

So if we cannot thrust the superiority of our religion down the throats of non Christians, what are we to do to fulfil the Great Commission? John Purdey lists 4 simple and practical things for us that represent a minimum response.

Firstly, we can work to heal the divisions in the church. We cannot hope to convince anyone of the universal love of Christ if we cannot show a universally loving church. That starts within our own church and, God knows, we have work to do. It extends to our own Anglican communion and then to the wider Christian church.

Secondly, we need to share the wealth. Like it or not, there is a financial dimension to the universal mission of the church. It takes money to evangelise and that money must come from us. We are still far too inwardly focused in this church. We're making good progress and we're now reaching out to our community and putting our money where our mouth is there – but, in the immortal words of Karen Carpenter - we've only just begun.

Thirdly, we can make friends across national boundaries. We can as individuals reach out to people from other countries and other cultures but we can also do that as a church.

Finally and most importantly, we can tell the story. We can stand up and proclaim the gospel and tell the story of Christian faith from the acts of the apostles though to the present day. For every challenge we receive that throws the evils of the church's history in our face, we respond with a story of love. I've talked before of the love of men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who stood up to the evils of Nazism and was martyred for his faith and his love. We may have our own stories closer to home.

Some dear friends and distant relations of ours live in Australia ; Bronwen and Greg Mitchell. Bronwen's father, Edwin is a retired Methodist minister, who coincidentally spent many years of his ministry in Bunbury , Western Australia , and is very familiar with the other St Boniface. Edwin and his wife Nelma were missionaries in China at the outbreak of the last war and were captured by the Japanese. They suffered terrible deprivation as you might expect. Nelma was pregnant at the time and was very worried about the impact of her captivity on her unborn child. The prisoners would scavenge for eggshells which they would then grind and mix with water into a paste for Nelma to drink in order to ensure that she got the calcium she would need in order to support her baby.

The experience did nothing to shake their faith – if anything it deepened it. They held no animosity or grudge against their captors – the love that they felt from God was too great to allow for that. That love shone through them throughout their lives. I'm sure you can come up with your own stories.

Even this week, we have another in the wonderful love of God flowing through Ben and Abi Witchell. Their deep and abiding faith is sustaining them through their current trauma as Abi recovers from the ordeal of her attack last week. Two things came out for me from their comments this week; firstly their thankfulness to God for the delivery of their son from harm and secondly, their concern for the attacker. There was no hint of bitterness, no call for revenge and no complaint at their lot. As Ben said when interviewed, if Abi remains paralysed then so be it. Many people live fulfilled and happy lives with such a condition. They know that God's love has taken them this far and will take them through whatever is to come.

So tell the stories to all who will listen. Our mission is not to conquer souls – it is, in Jesus own words, to baptize and to teach. God's love will do the rest. In Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.” We should hold those roles in mind. We are not the swords of God slashing hither and thither. We are much more domestic than that. Salt to season and flavour food, a candle to light the way.

Our Great Commission should be to become the salt of the earth, ensuring that our behaviour reflects God's love and telling the story so that others can hear and also to be the light of the world to allow God's love to shine through us just as this week it is shining through Ben and Abi Witchell.

We ask all this in Jesus name. Amen

**Tom Crotty**