The context for our two readings this morning could hardly be more timely. We are about to enter a new phase of mission and evangelism in England, promoted heavily by Lambeth Palace, entitled ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. This sets the days between Ascension and Pentecost aside for prayer and witness. The accent is firmly on persuading individuals to open their hearts (and minds?) to Jesus. This recruitment-membership drive - and that is what it is - rests on the hypothesis that if the church is not adding to its number it is dying; that Christianity is becoming a minority faith; so get out and sell and market all you can.

In our readings today, we have a well-known story - three faithful people, who although persecuted for their faith, defy an autocratic dictatorship, witness for the truth, and so convert their oppressors. The Book of Daniel says, through its key stories, that if the faithful stand for the truth, others will have their hearts and minds turned to the Lord. The Letter to the Hebrews, in our reading, gives us a litany of faith-filled resistors, whose witness converts even the hardest heart and the most stubborn head.

So our church leaders today seem to think that if we keep proclaiming the truth loudly and boldly, we will eventually get results. But I doubt this very much, and so let me explain why. The Church of England - or at least its hierarchy - are stuck in broadcast mode. Like the proverbial Englishman abroad, they cannot make themselves understood in a world that increasingly finds the church baffling. Especially in spheres such as sexuality, gender, equality, safeguarding and being open to accountability. But does the church perceive this? No. It just talks louder, hoping it will be heard. It won’t.

In all this, the Church only seeks to make itself more appealing, and attractive to those who might join. Yet it rarely asks the same public why they don’t join. It is like a business doing even more hard selling, with increasing desperation. But unwilling to ask...
the consumers why they aren’t buying. What is strange about this situation is that the
drivers of the agenda are deeply concerned about mission and evangelism. So, they act
out of the best of intentions. But the problem is that the underlying theology of mission
and of the Holy Spirit - missiology and pneumatology - is deeply deficient. Let me
explain more here.

John V. Taylor’s classic *The Go-Between God* (SCM, 1974), describes true mission as
finding out what God is doing, and then trying to co-operate. Evangelism, said Taylor, is
first and foremost God’s work; not a sacrificial effort on the part of the churches to
appease God. This *Missio Dei* is our traditional way, as a church, of understanding how
God acts in the world, to reconcile all things to God through Christ. This recognises
that God is omnipresent, and so can and does act in all creation - so not just within the
recognised boundaries of ecclesial life (which are, in any case, like all borders, inherently
contestable). There is ample scriptural warrant for thinking about the work of the Holy
Spirit in just this way. The Jewish disciples, for example, ‘discovering’ that God is at
work amongst the gentiles - and that God had started something in those communities
before any proactive mission had got underway.

The *Missio Dei* recognises something crucial in God’s ecology of mission. Namely, that
God might choose to speak *from* the world *to* the church. The church, in other words, is
not always God’s starting point for conversion-related initiatives. Sometimes, God needs
to convert the church, and can’t do it from within. So, God works from without. The
Holy Spirit is omnipresent, and at work ahead of the church, and outside it. The
question, always, is can the church recognise this? And can the church *receive* what the
Spirit is doing beyond its boundaries? And in the act of reception, be prepared to be
reformed and renewed?

The answer from the churches to such questions - say on issues of gender, sexuality and
equality - is frequently, ‘no’. The church will not receive the progressive truth, justice and
change that the world has undertaken and adopted. The church resists the change. It
resists contemporary culture. It does not believe that the Holy Spirit could be at work
independent of church leaders in our contemporary culture, and could use that cultural
change to reform and renew the church.

So, the world, slowly but surely, backs away from the church, and leaves it to live in its
own bubble of self-justifying rhetoric and self-shaping strategies. This gets the church
nowhere, of course. Just further up the creek without a paddle. And as for evangelism, only the converted are left to be preached at.

I’m reminded of two very contrasting approaches to mission witnessed thirty years ago, whilst I was training for ordination. Both were in a UPA in the North-East. The first project was evangelical, intense and focussed on converting local people. The evangelical mission lasted just a few years – and then left: a lack of ‘results’, apparently. Stony ground, I daresay.

The second, Franciscan, arrived empty-handed. They drew in the community by asking them if they could help furnish the Brother’s bare flat. The locals obliged. The first item to arrive was a chair for the unfurnished sitting room – a passenger seat taken from a written-off Ford Capri. More bits of odd furniture arrived. A kettle was found. The Brothers rejoiced at every gift. The Franciscans still work there in the community.

The Franciscans came to a community usually written off as a place of poverty and lack. Yet as the Brothers brought nothing, they affirmed their neighbours. They were able to encounter and encourage a community that was generous and resourceful. They liked to give, and they took pleasure and pride in looking after those less fortunate than themselves. That included the Brothers.

In return, the Brothers simply offered a ministry that listened, and only then helped. The Brothers made no assumptions about what the community lacked. They went in, expecting to find God’s provision in what many would have described as a desert. They lived joyfully with their people, and did not presume any lacking on the part of the community that they served. For the Franciscans, God was already dwelling there – long before they arrived.

If we started with a theology of evangelism rooted in the values of the Kingdom of God and Missio Dei, the churches would spend much more time listening, and less time talking. More time receiving from the world, and less time pumping out propaganda. But I wonder, sometimes, if church leaders really do trust God, and genuinely believe in the omnipresent power of the Holy Spirit abroad in mission? Our leaders don’t talk and behave as though they do believe this. They seem to think it all depends on them. They sound, all too often, like sacred custodians of a tribal deity in a remote village. Their God is small and tame; but it is their god. But all transcendence has been thoroughly domesticated.
“Jesus is the answer, what was your question?” would be a fair characterisation of our current evangelistic approach as a national church. If our church leaders think they do have all the answers, behaving like defensive omni-competent rulers, I doubt we will sound as though we are genuinely interested in the concerns and questions that people may have. If the Church of England really wants to recover some vision for national mission, and something of the urgency of evangelism, then there is only one thing to do to begin with. Nothing.

Yes, nothing. Just be still. And then learn to listen to the world around. Then we might hear what are the actual cares and concerns of our communities. Then we might begin to discern where God is already at work. Then we might receive from these communities what God would have this church become.