

Prophets for our Time: Fr Vincent J Donovan

by Bishop John Baker

Vincent Donovan is an American Roman Catholic priest, a member of the Spiritan order, who worked for a good many years in Tanzania. His experiences there moved him in 1978 to write a book, a modest paperback of some 160 pages, but one which had an impact – and still does – far beyond what its author expected. It has been republished in 1982, 2001 and 2004, which suggests it is on the way to becoming a modern classic. Its British publishers are the SCM-Canterbury Press, and its title is *Christianity Rediscovered*.

The review in the *Methodist Recorder* said: 'This is one of those rare books which change the way you look at the world', and time and again I have come across people whose faces light up when you ask if they know it, and who excitedly say very much the same thing. The title by itself might lead you to expect a work of abstract theological theory or possibly a testimony to a conversion experience and its consequences for the writer's personal life. But it is neither of these things. The book's sub-title is 'An Epistle from the Masai', and it tells how the author's experiences in trying to bring the Christian Gospel to the Masai people in Tanzania turned completely upside down his assumptions about the Christian church and its mission.

The Masai are a Nilo-Hamitic people who, like the Nuer in the Sudan, live by cattle herding, but they have certain very striking traits that set them apart from their neighbours. Research over recent years has traced their history back a very long way. Words in their language, the designs of their ornaments, some of their ceremonies, link them to a period of sojourn in Ancient Egypt. From there they slowly migrated south, leaving such traces of their passage as the name of the capital of the Sudan, Khartoum, which is a Masai word. Eventually they reached Kenya and Northern Tanzania, where they are today, having acquired on the way a fearsome reputation as warriors – and they are intensely proud of their inheritance.

From the viewpoint of the Christian churches the Masai, at the time when Fr Donovan's story opens, had proved to be singularly hard to evangelise. Broadly speaking, the only Masai who had been baptised were youngsters who had been sent away from their home communities to attend mission schools. That meant that they had no Christian family or village context; they were isolated from home and from each other. What happened, of course, was that when they left school they simply sank without trace in the sea of paganism all around them. The only relic of their time with the Christian church would be the Christian name they had been given at baptism.

This led Fr Donovan to take a fresh look at areas where the church had thought that on the whole it had done quite well. Take the Loliondo district of Tanzania, where he and his colleagues were working. It was covered with mission compounds and churches, hospitals and schools; but Christianity had not taken root. If the church was visible and active, that was due mostly to the huge injections of money and personnel from outside – religious colonialism, some call it. After 100 years of missionary endeavour no more than 18% of the population were Christian. Could that, Fr Donovan asked himself, be called success? And spread right across their area, seemingly heedless of the church's call, were the Masai.

Fr Donovan was moved to experiment by inspiration from the Apostle Paul. So far the Church's strategy had been to bring some of the most needed benefits of civilisation, medicine and education, teach the schoolchildren the faith, and wait for grateful Africans to flood in – which in any great numbers they sadly did not do. By contrast, in his three missionary safaris (a very good word for them) St Paul had covered a much larger area than Loliondo district, and left communities of converts in many places, without putting up a single building or, in our sense, ordaining a single clergyperson.

This turned Fr Donovan's attention to another problem. One reason why missionary efforts tended to run out of steam was something which has been labelled 'the choke law'. This was simply the fact that if a mission team did manage to attract converts, then quite soon all its energy was taken up seeing to the running of the European-model 'parishes' which it had created, and providing pastoral care for the people. St Paul

tried hard never to get caught in that trap. He did revisit some places where he had preached the Gospel, and it is clear from the letters we have which he sent to various communities of converts that they did from time to time contact him, mostly to complain about fellow-Christians or to seek his advice; or he might write to them if, as with the Galatians, he heard that they were straying from the message of the Gospel. But running the local church was not what he was called to do. 'Woe is me, if I preach not the Gospel', he said. Indeed, in Corinth, he tells us, he did not even baptise more than three or four people.

The lesson Fr Donovan drew from all this was that we must distinguish between two quite different activities: the first is telling people the Gospel, or, as it is technically termed, 'primary or first evangelisation'; the second is church planting, helping a new Christian community to learn the art of worship, managing the corporate affairs of the community, dealing with everything we put under the heading of pastoral care. All that is none of a missionary's business. He or she is there to enable people, if they wish it, to learn about and understand the basic Christian message, the Good News, to baptise those who then ask for baptism, to bring them up to their first Eucharist – and then to GO! It was for these new Christians to work out their own life as church.

So Fr Donovan devised a simple plan of action. He first wrote to his bishop, not asking for official approval for his plan, but just telling the bishop that, as the church had made little progress with the Masai with the standard methods, he was going to give it a try with his own. He then loaded up a Land-Rover with camping equipment and supplies, and set out with one companion, a young Masai man called Paul (significantly enough!) who had trained as a catechist, and could act as an interpreter.

They began by visiting a carefully selected Masai kraal, where lived an influential elder called Ndangoya. Let Fr Donovan take up the story. 'I asked Ndangoya if we could speak with him about something very important. He immediately sent for the elders of three neighbouring kraals, and when they arrived, he asked what I wanted to talk about. I said I wanted to talk to

them about God, and he answered, "Who can refuse to talk about God?"

'I then pointed out that we were well known among the Masai for our work in schools and hospitals, and for our interest in the Masai and their cattle. But now I no longer wanted to talk about schools and hospitals but about God in the life of the Masai, and about the message of Christianity. Indeed it was for this very work of explaining the message of Christianity to the different peoples of Africa that I came here from far away. Ndangoya looked at me for a long time, and then said in a puzzled way, "If that is why you came here, why did you wait so long to tell us about this?" '

To this, Fr Donovan says, he had no answer, but after discussion the elders agreed to his request and said they would recommend to their people to attend. But the sessions would have to be before dawn, because at dawn the cattle had to be driven out to pasture. So it was fixed that one day a week Donovan would be there to talk to them for an hour. He then went to the elders of five other sections of Masailand, and fixed up with them to do the same thing on five other days of the week. And the question he was asked in each section was the same: 'Why did you not come to us before?'

The descriptions in *Christianity Rediscovered* of his teaching sessions are graphic and fascinating. We can all of us identify, I am sure, with the knot in his stomach the very first time he had to set out the Gospel message, starting from cold, to these people of a strange culture which he had never encountered before at such close quarters. It is tempting to quote at length, but we need to keep some time for the lessons Fr Donovan draws for our western churches. Let me, therefore, summarise some of his sharpest experiences.

The Masai had a firm belief in the reality of God, but what kind of God? That first week Donovan asked the large crowd that had assembled what they thought about God, and a young elder stood up, and said, 'If I ever run into God, I will put a spear through him.' It would be easy to assume that pagans who have a religion which teaches what we would call a morally inferior God are content with that moral inferiority. They may well have the same trouble as we do with the problem of a God

who seems to be cruel or arbitrary, but they have no way they know of escaping from him. To quote Fr Donovan again: 'Then they told me of God, Engai, who loves rich people more than poor people, healthy people more than the sick, the God who loved good people because they were good, and rewarded them for their goodness.' You and I have got beyond that, haven't we? But when I read it, my mind went back to a Sunday School where one child had drawn a picture to illustrate the words, 'God will love me if I am good'... We have many Christians in the West who believe that, and many more who agonise because the facts of life tell against it.

A shock of a different kind came when the year of teaching sessions was over, and the people of those kraals had agreed that they would accept the Christian faith. Fr Donovan then talked to them about being baptised, and went through the group saying who had shown sufficient understanding of what was involved in being a Christian and who had not. Some would have to wait until they knew better what was required. When he got to the third failed candidate, an elder stood up and said, 'Stop! We came to your classes together. We have attended them together. If some have not listened as well as others or not understood, there are those of us who will help them and understand for them. We will all be baptised together, or none.' And so it was.

When it came to the time for their first Eucharist, they were encouraged to work out the order of service together. All they had to include was the reading and Our Lord's words of institution. The Masai have many rituals in their culture, and they wove some together to make an occasion which would move through the whole kraal, and be a time of mutual reconciliation and bonding. They were asked to decide on their own name for the Eucharist, and they agreed in the end on *sinyati oroporor*. *Oroporor* is their word for the year-groups of young warriors, bound together by a solemn covenant. *Sinyati* means holy, thus echoing without realising it St Paul's words, 'The bread which we break, is it not a fellowship in the body of Christ?'

But, of course, one thing had to be supplied from outside, and that was the celebrant. Fr Donovan had to do that for them. But that did not shake his conviction that there were Masai

whose grasp and living of the Gospel at the deepest level made it perfectly reasonable for them to preside, and the Church should have been able to ordain them. There was another subversive thought that occurred to him. During the instruction some of the most penetrating questions and comments came from the women present – it was, incidentally a break with Masai custom for women to speak in public at all. Why should that immense reservoir of the Spirit not be tapped? To us in the west such a thought is now commonplace; but to the Masai it had never occurred until the Gospel suggested it.

For what was, to Masai eyes, the new truth which the Gospel brought, and which completely transformed their view of the world? It was the idea that God loved all his human children alike, at one and the same time a dizzying liberation and a devastating challenge. And this life-changing vision came through Jesus, God, Engai, as one of us, and through no one else. Just how demanding that was to the Masai, anyone with experience of tribalism in Africa will appreciate. Perhaps it was that demand which led one class to go right through all the sessions, and then very politely to say, 'No, thank you, we don't want to be Christians.'

But Fr Donovan's book was not written to give Western Christians an ego-trip, but to rouse them to ask, from perhaps an unusual angle, why it is that people are turning away in such numbers from the mainstream churches in Europe and America. Is it, he asks, because we have been too deeply embedded in our culture, so that we are simply a huge business, run according to management rules, and all our efforts must be focused on making the Church perfect, because salvation can be had only by being 'inside'? Is it also because we insist that there is only one way to 'be Church'? Would we ever dare to let our Christian communities create their own liturgies, or celebrate the sacraments in such a way as to make sense to the world around us? Have we really looked at the traditional ways in which we respond to the hardest questions in life – those about evil, and suffering, and so on?

After 11 years in Tanzania Fr Donovan was called back to work in America. One of the things that struck him most forcibly on his return was the alienation of youth from the Church. What was especially interesting to him was that the young reminded

him of the year-groups of young warriors in Masailand, with their own language and symbols and values. Of the Christian Gospel they had only the sketchiest idea, if any. How do you help the Good News to make sense to them? A young university student gave him this advice: 'In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.' A better description of the role of a prophet it would be hard to find.

There is a theme running through Fr Donovan's book which seems to me to be central to his whole argument. All you can do, or ought to try to do, is to give people the heart of the Gospel, and then let them discover for themselves what that means in their own lives. They must put flesh, their flesh, on the bones. Their lives must be an incarnation of the Gospel, not in a sacred enclave but in the world where they are. They must find their own way forward toward the Kingdom of God, with God's Spirit as their guide. Only so will the Church be a living body as distinct from a mechanical institution.

In this talk I have constantly spoken of the Gospel, but never said what the author meant by that. To find a statement of the Gospel without one's own slant on it is probably impossible. But at the end of his book Fr Donovan has reproduced an African Creed, and I cannot better end than by reading it to you.

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He

was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptised in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe.