*Jason Byassee is a Methodist Minister from Vancouver who teaches preaching at Vancouver School of Theology. He is currently on sabbatical at Durham, and was invited to join the Archbishop of York’s team for the northern bishops’ Tell Serve Give mission in Liverpool. Jason blogged each day about his experiences on the mission, read about Wednesday 6 March here:*

Going into this Liverpool mission, I was most nervous about acts of public witness. But perhaps I needed to worry more about evangelizing within the church itself.

Today a gaggle of bishops and clergy hit the intersection of Church and Paradise Streets to offer ashes on foreheads and to tell people God loves them. Bishop Paul Bayes of Liverpool grabbed a megaphone and hollered the good news that God loves all people. We all offered to pray for folks, distributed ashes, made smalltalk. It wasn’t too bad. Mainline churches aren’t known for interrupting folks in the public square with missives of God’s love, but we should do more of it. We’ll get better at it, and the world needs to hear it.

We started the day in Liverpool Parish Church for an Ash Wednesday service co-led by Archbishop Sentamu, several other Anglican bishops, and also the two Roman Catholic bishops of Liverpool and the local Methodist district chair. This ecumenical service broke out all the liturgical tricks: incense, sung eucharist, the blessing of a new icon, a cracker jack sermon from Archbishop Sentamu. And in a perfectly Liverpudlian touch, I believe I even met a relative of Paul McCartney!

My colleagues Carolyn Edwards and Rob Suekarran were with me, sitting behind several rows of teenaged girls who were Religious Education students in a local school, learning about Christianity. Most seemed totally unfamiliar with Christian liturgy. We found ourselves engaging with them almost despite ourselves. Carolyn told several of the young women about the colours being worn by the clergy—that these change with the season, and that each says something important about God.

The two women in front of me were singing and following along a bit more than their colleagues. At one point, one said to the other, “This is where they think bread and wine become Jesus Christ’s body and blood.” The other turned to her, astonished, and asked, “How?!”

The entire history of Christian theology could be told in response to that young woman’s wise question. How indeed?

I couldn’t help myself at this point, so I interrupted: “We don’t know how. That’s where faith comes in.” This is a classic dodge, of course. We can say a good deal more than this. But not in a whispered conversation during communion. So I had to add something else: “It’s cool though, isn’t it?”

I got up and went to communion with the others who think we know what’s happening, though of course we can’t fathom it. They stayed behind, I hope at least a little more interested, as I wished they’d gone to the Lord’s Table with me.

Maybe this is evangelism: pointing another to the staggering mystery of the creator of all things in simple bread and wine, inviting them to dine on him and become one with him with us, growing toward a new kind of humanity together. It’s not bad at all. It’s life itself.

