



THE KINGDOM

KINGDOM MISSION

Sunday 6 June 2021

EXTENDED SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Our focus today is the mission of the kingdom. As John Stott famously said, “our God is a missionary God.” And yet, people everywhere are averse to the idea of Christian mission, and even hostile to the idea of Christian evangelisation - and some of them are outside the church! Mission and evangelism is not where we naturally gravitate. We tend to associate mission with cross cultural work - which we are 100% committed to at GRLC - partnering with people in other contexts.

But still, we don't think of ourselves as 'missionaries', do we? In fact, I think we are generally pretty freaked out by that idea for many reasons, maybe connected to our own fragility or fear or social pressure - Christianity is not just dismissed, it's maligned in popular culture and so we can feel intimidated by that. As a result, we are unsure of the impact of talking about faith with someone we know. For me, my bias is toward mission and evangelism; I have observed this pattern that when I am travelling closely to Jesus, keeping in step with the Spirit, I find mission dominates my thinking. And when I am just in spiritual auto pilot, I don't see and think and feel clearly and therefore I don't respond out of overflow. You naturally talk about what fills your imagination or passion - so when Jesus is not my passion, I don't talk about Him much.

We have been praying for our missionaries, but we so easily forget that we are all missionaries. God's missionary people, partnering with Him in the revealing of His Kingdom! Commanded to make disciples, to bear witness to the resurrection, to the hope we have, to live aligned to the kingdom! So today I want to talk about the 'who', the 'how' and the 'why' of mission for us:

1. The WHO of mission (Matthew 5:1-10)

Jesus' sermon on the mount begins with the detail that a large crowd of people are following Him wherever He was teaching - fishermen, sick people, hurting people, poor people; not the A list, not the elite; but the desperate, the lonely, the outcasts, the spiritual losers, the unlikely. Etched into their culture is Israel's story of Abraham, Moses, David - of the kingdom of God - and they are hearing good news that this kingdom is now available to all sorts of people. The blessed ones: the ones that can deeply smile are the ones for whom the kingdom has come near and who can receive it.

People who are poor in spirit, who recognise they are spiritually bankrupt; that they have nothing to offer God; who grieve for the state of their lives; who are humbled by their lowly state yet hungry for their lives and their work to be made right; who are hungry for God and for mercy and for an end to the conflict in their heart and mind; but also for an end to the conflict in their outside world; who are hungry for peace instead of revenge, for the will and way of God to be done. These are the 'Blessed' - the successful, happy, kingdom is for them. We can read this wrong if we're not careful. The 'beatitudes' are not 'beautiful attitudes' or virtues to attain, they're not formulas that help us gain status and favour with God. No, they are descriptions of the kinds of people for whom the kingdom is available and experienceable. The kingdom is for those who ache. And I think this provides us a clue to the 'who'... Yes, the gospel is for everyone - your neighbours, people in your workplace, your barista, your hairdresser - but the clue to look for is the ache in a person. Find the ache for the kingdom and you find the 'who'.

Part of the theory behind 'Practice Sundays' is to give you margin to not only think about these people, but build relationships with them because it is only in the relating to people that you can genuinely find their ache for the kingdom. Do you know your neighbours? Do you know what's happening in their lives? Do they really know you? Do you make time to stop and chat for too long, or is it just a hand wave as you drive out your garage? The 'who' is not simply everyone with a pulse - that's overwhelming - the 'who' is the person with the quiet ache, the secretly desperate, those longing for the kingdom they don't realise they want. Most of the time it's hiding, waiting for you to uncover it.

2. The 'HOW' of mission (Matthew 5:13-16)

Jesus described people of His kingdom as like salt and light. If you were stuck in a cave and only one person had a torch, you would probably gravitate toward that person because their light would be a source of comfort and would help you see where you are going. Light turns darkness to colour, contrast, clarity. Salt in ancient times did two things: (1) it gave food flavour and (2) it was rubbed into meat to preserve it from decay. And Jesus is saying there is something distinctive about us that contrasts darkness, that flavours society, that is also preservative.

So the 'how' of mission? Simple really: it's not the domain of the most gifted speaker, the most spiritual believer, or the most extraverted personality type. It's not about having a slick gospel presentation on demand. It's being light, being salty - with your neighbours, with your work colleagues, or whoever God brings to your attention. We live in a time where the church seems to be polarising in its view of how to interact with its world.

We are seeing the rise of people who are defensive against the culture, who feel like the church is being persecuted and they have to 'take back' the culture for Jesus. This was vividly displayed when Trump supporters stormed the Capital Building earlier this year, holding confederate flags and crosses. The view was that, "we have to fight for our rights as Christians, and if we get into power we can advance the kingdom of God." But that kind of power has the opposite effect on the kingdom.

Some are more of a purity from the culture type of people: they have nothing to do with society, they put their kids in a Christian bubble and protect them from the evils of secular society. They see that it's all bad, so evangelise and disciple, but ignore the world.

But, more commonly, I think we see a shift towards being relevant to the culture: we want to be just regular people that look like we are not stuck in the 1950's; not weird, not critical not holier than thou. Problem is, we get so blended in that you can't tell the difference - the light is hidden, the salt has lost its saltiness, and Jesus says that's useless! I recently listened to a fascinating conversation between Jordan Peterson and Bishop Barron, a highly respected American Catholic. Peterson (who comes from the field of psychology, not theology) was asking the Bishop why young people are leaving the church in droves. Their shared conclusion was that there was, to paraphrase, nothing salty about the church - the problem was not that Christianity was overbearing, but that we lack distinction. We are not calling young people to the heroic adventure of living radically, sacrificially, with a vision greater than simply how to find their best life. We are not calling them to be salt and light. Of course, being offensive is not our ministry - but neither is being just aggregable. We have to find a way to stand on biblical truth, to flavour our culture and the conversations with a posture of humility and love.

Faithful presence within the culture: I would contend that the biblical vision of mission is to be genuinely in, but not of, the culture; to be distinctively salty and light, where you integrate faith, to live with a love for people, servant hearted, emotionally healthy, vocationally purposeful, secure people grounded in a truth greater than themselves for a purpose greater than themselves.

Christianity became so compelling and dominant in the first few hundred years, not because it was politically powerful, but because they were brilliant at being salt and light as a radically distinctive community.

Two great plagues of the Roman Empire in 165AD and 265AD were devastating, killing up to 25% of the Empire's population. Such was the stigma of the plague that the Roman elite and physicians fled the cities to take refuge in the country! When people became sick, they were thrown out into the streets to die alone. It was every man for themselves, and eventually bodies were just left where they fell and piled in heaps. But history tells us that, during these pandemics, Christian communities became legendary for their actions: they stayed and served the wider society, cared for the sick, buried the dead. In fact, the Christian survival rate was so high during the pandemics because they cared for each other, nursing their community back to health rather than abandoning each other! Sometimes this was as simple as keeping sick people hydrated. It is believed this faithful presence and brave compassion ultimately led to the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire in the 4th Century. There were various attempts at reproducing such social charity and compassion in paganism, but they failed every time because the Christian vision of the kingdom could not be sustained in a pagan vision of the world. It was this same vision that later would see Christianity invent schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, nursing, midwifery, the abolition of slavery - just to name a few.

The 'how' of mission is simply being salty and light amid the ache of humanity. Practice Sundays are our simple attempt to nurture that - that worship is much more than a song; worship is mission and mission is worship. So, in the past month, those in the Community Connect Team have been worshipping God by being present in the lives of people who need love, community and practical service. Some are on the edge of homelessness, some are unemployed, some are new mothers with no support, some are isolated, some are refugees, and some are just broke - and for such as these, Jesus says, is the kingdom. And we get the privilege of their presence - they have much to teach us; they deposit something in us as much as we in them. And maybe, as we build community with them, we will be able to give a reason for the hope we have. Which brings me to the most important question of them all...

3. The 'WHY' of mission

I recently listened to Simon Sinek's best seller: 'Start with Why'. His basic thesis is that people don't buy 'what' you do, they buy 'why' you do it. The core idea is that it's the 'why' that matters more than the 'what' or 'how'. And if you don't know your 'why', then you tend to only ever talk about the 'what' and 'how': What I do as a pastor, what we do as a church, how we do what we do... These may all be helpful conversations, but they skate around the most important and compelling conversation of 'why'.

And I was just struck by the question, "what is my why?" Really, why do I care about any of this? If I had one minute to explain to someone my 'why', what would I say? My 'why' can't seriously be because I'm needed, or there is a roster to fill, or it's my duty, or it's what we do, or it's what's expected, or so I feel good, or because I'm paid to, or to set an example... But it can so easily become those things. We can end up just 'doing' and be devoid of a 'why' altogether.

So I've been trying to put it into words that make sense, and I can't land on one all-purpose answer that works in every context. I think when I boil it all down my 'why' is simply: **because Jesus is my Saviour and my King.**

But I could also agree with Paul's 'why' in Philippians 3: **I want to know Christ** as friend, as the resurrected Saviour and Lord of all.

But if I were explaining that to someone who is not a disciple, I think I'd say something like, *"because there are all sorts of people or ideas making offers and claims about life, but in all my searching there is no one like Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the ache we can't fill and all the questions we can't answer. Jesus invites you into a life that is full of meaning and hope, now and forever."*

I think that I need to be much clearer about my 'why', and I wonder if you would take time this week to really ponder, "what's my why?" But you know what, people also need to hear from you? It's not just 'your why', but also 'God's why'...

What is God's 'why'? We have to rewind this series all the way back to Genesis chapter 1 and 2 - God's big 'why' is you, me, and all of creation! And even after we usurped God as King, His 'why' remains:

- *Jesus said the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10)*
- *Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)*
- *Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8)*
- *To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth, under Christ (Ephesians 1:10)*

These are all actions of God's unchanging 'why' - and it's the reason that we even have a 'why' that not only worth believing, but worth living and sharing!

We are saved and called into a life with kingdom mission. Friends, we are not a church with a mission - we are a mission with a church. May we see it, live it as salt and light in a world of ache, and may we resemble those first disciples in Acts 4:20 who said, *"As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

PERSONAL STUDY

This fortnight, take time to read Philippians 3:1-14 several times.

Look for aspects of Paul's 'why' in this passage.

In this passage where do you see examples of Paul thinking and living really intentionally as a disciple of Christ?

What inspires or challenges you about these words of Paul?

Take time to unearth the real 'why' of your life in the following areas: (*this is harder than you think!*)

- Why am I a Christian?
- Why do I do the job I do? (this may be paid or voluntary equivalent employment or activity, including stay at home parenting)

Try and articulate it in one or two sentences, maximum, to someone who you trust to work this through with. And don't stress if you can't quite get the words right! Just have a go at speaking it out...