

The Meaning of Mission

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[Reading: St. Matthew Ch 9 v35-Ch 10 v8]

I've been asked to give a talk to confirmation candidates entitled: What did Jesus do?

Part of the answer to that question might be found in today's reading (and passages like it) which suggest that Jesus, amongst other things: preached the kingdom, healed the sick, cured lepers, raised the dead, and cast out demons.

But I believe there's a deeper, more important, question than What did Jesus do?

It's What did Jesus *think* he was doing?

There's a subtle difference between the two questions if you look at them carefully. In the first emphasis is placed on the activities Jesus engaged in. In the second it's on what those activities *meant* to Jesus.

In asking What did Jesus think he was doing? we are probing his beliefs, motives, goals, intentions, as opposed to merely outlining *what* he did.

This is important, I feel, because the rationale behind Jesus' mission is lost on most Christians.

Let me explain what I mean by focusing, for a moment, on the central section of our text (Mt 10:1-4), which deals with the appointment of the twelve apostles.

What did Jesus think he was doing when he appointed them? What had he in mind? I'm sure most of you will appreciate that he didn't pick twelve men willy-nilly. The election of twelve disciples was highly suggestive. It spoke of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 21:9-14). But what point was Jesus trying to make?

To answer this question we have to go back to the Old Testament. When God called the descendents of Jacob out of Egypt (Ex 1-12) he gave them the land of Canaan and made them a great nation (Josh 1-Judg 21). The twelve tribes that made up the people of Israel were summoned to worship God and to be a light to the gentiles (Ex 3:12; Isa 2:1-3). But things went wrong for them right from the very start.

When they entered the Promised Land the Israelites continued to worship the old gods, rather than the one who had delivered them from slavery (Judg 3:7). Then they asked for a king, even though God was their king and had vowed to protect them from all their enemies (1 Sam 8-12). Once they got their king, society became stratified as the gulf between rich and poor grew ever wider (Isa 3:13-15).

In the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the burden of taxation became so great that the ten northern tribes split off from the two tribes which were based in Judaea (1 Kgs 12). God's people were thus divided into two antagonistic kingdoms. Successive generations of northerners became thoroughly paganised and paid the price by being exiled to Assyria (2 Kgs 17).

Two hundred years later (in 586 BC) Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians because the House of David played fast and loose with Mosaic Law (2 Kgs 24-25). Even though the Judaeans were released from captivity, they were unable to shake off the control and influence of their Persian, Greek, and Roman overlords, right down to Jesus' day.

This is what makes Jesus' appointment of the twelve so intriguing. First century Jews anticipated a time of ingathering when God would summon his scattered tribes from the four corners of the earth (Ezek 34:4-16; 37; Hos 2; Mic 5:1-9; Mat 19:28). On its heels an era of Messianic bliss was expected, culminating in the redemption of Israel and the transformation of the cosmos (Isa 60).

If Jesus was inferring that the twelve tribes were back in business, in the guise of his apostles, then he was claiming that this New Age had already begun!

In the passage we read this morning there are multiple instances in which God's redemptive purposes blossom in Jesus' mission. When he proclaims God's reign; leads like a shepherd; conquers disease and death; puts satanic forces to flight; Jesus is enacting Yahweh's promise to deliver his people from captivity and to turn the tide of history in their favour (Isa 40-66).

This is what Jesus *believed* he was doing. By appointing the twelve he *intended* that his compatriots should recollect God's promise that he would do a "new thing" (Isa 42:9; 48:3, 6): gather his dispersed people from the four corners of the earth, overcome their divisions, then govern the nations through the promised Son of David (Ezek 37:22-28). Jesus claimed that these promises were being fulfilled in his own life and ministry. Any Jew who had the slightest understanding of Scripture would have known what Jesus was getting at when he elected the twelve apostles.

The point I want to make, however, is that many Christians are not so clued in to what Jesus was about because they have – quite literally – lost the plot.

By "plot" I mean the story that the bible tells of creation, fall, and redemption. Of how God created humans for relationship with himself (Gen 1-2); their distrust of God and aspiration to become divine-like (Gen 3); God's judgement of Adam's descendents in a flood (Gen 7); his gracious calling of Abraham (Gen 12); the subsequent birth of a nation chosen to be a witness to God's faithfulness (Deut 28:10); the failure of that nation to be light to the gentiles (Josh-2 Kgs); its punishment and captivity (2 Kgs 17; 25); the prophetic longing for moral and spiritual regeneration that came in its wake (Isa-Mal); the birth of the Messiah, who in his life, death, and resurrection, sinlessly lived out Israel's original calling (Mt 1:15//Hos 11:1-7); his triumph over the forces of darkness (Col 1:15), and the creation of a new heaven and earth (Rev 21).

I can of course only give the very briefest of sketches here. But you can see how our reading fits into the wider story which the bible tells. The twelve tribes of Israel failed in their calling to be witnesses to the reality of God in the world. In taking up where Israel left off Jesus begins the process of "call and response" all over again. It's as if he's re-running Jewish history – only this time the response to God's call is positive and effective. The twelve, in this instance, say "Yes" to God, and despite the ups and downs in the lives of the apostles, our presence here this morning is evidence that these men were indeed lights in a dark world. We are here because of them. We are indebted to them for their obedience and faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel. They succeeded where Israel failed in their calling to be light to the nations.

I suggested that many Christians have lost the plot, have little awareness of the big picture, or of the wider story which the bible tells us about the human predicament. This seriously undermines our notion of what mission is about. I believe the essence of Christian truth has to do with telling the right story.

Throughout church history there have been clerics and lay people who have told stories at variance with the one handed down to us in the scriptures. In the second century a wealthy ship

owner called Marcion insisted that Christians should reject the God of the Old Testament because he was a tyrant. In the third century a priest by the name of Arius maintained that Jesus was created rather than an eternal being. Apollinarius, a fourth century theologian, argued that Jesus was divine but not really human. A fourth century British scholar by the name of Pelagius was of the opinion that people could be saved by their own efforts.

All of these ideas are still knocking around today. People are telling different stories about who God and Jesus are, and what salvation means. What they all have in common is that they have broken faith with the witness of Scripture.

Irenaeus, a second century theologian from Lyons, in France, says that correctly read the books of the bible reveal a picture of Christ as a king. When chopped and changed they portray Christ as a fox or dog (*Against the Heresies* 1.8.1).

The implications for our understanding of mission are enormous. If we don't have the right picture of Christ we won't faithfully proclaim his gospel. If we don't know the biblical plot we won't have a story of hope to tell.

What, then, in the light of all of this, is the meaning of "mission"?

I think the first thing we'd have to say is that we can only really understand mission if we know what Jesus *thought* or *believed* he was doing during his ministry. This is where we must begin. Not with what Jesus did, but with what he believed he was doing.

Jesus didn't run about the place helping people just because he was a decent, civic minded individual. He didn't heal people just because he had therapeutic powers. Jesus went about doing good, healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, saving the lost, because he believed that the time of Israel's spiritual captivity was at an end (Isa 40:1-11). He went about preaching the good news of God's Arrival because he believed it was irrupting in his own life (Isa 61:1-4). He went to the cross because he believed that he was the promised Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (Isa 53). From first to last Jesus' mission was controlled by the scriptures.

Any notion of mission that we have must be rooted in the unfolding story of redemption that we find in the bible. Christian mission, as St. Luke says, is about telling the continuing story of all that Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1).

My concern is that many Christians are moving away from this story. Often it's because they have forgotten or don't believe it any more – or because they prefer stories that tickle their fancy rather than challenge their shallow, mediocre lives (Mt 16:24).

In the early part of the 20th century there was a German born theologian called Albert Schweitzer. He was a brilliant scholar who wrote a critically acclaimed book entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). In it he came to the conclusion that Jesus' life was tragic because he believed that God was going to intervene in history and transform the world – but didn't. Jesus' response was to cast himself upon the wheel of history to see if he could achieve something for humankind, but in Schweitzer's words the wheel of history collapsed on Jesus and crushed him.

Schweitzer was so impressed with Jesus' "noble failure" that he became a medical missionary and headed off to Africa to set up a hospital. His motto was "Reverence for Life". He won the Noble Peace Prize in 1953. His humanitarian endeavours, we might say, were inspired by a misreading of the New Testament!

I wonder what story you tell about Jesus Christ. How closely does it compare with what the New Testament writers have to say about him? Or does the Jesus you preach reflect your own philosophical, ethical, or religious self interests?

The Labour MP Tony Benn said in an interview: "I am a disciple of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth". I wanted to ask him what teachings in particular? Just the Sermon on the Mount (a favourite of Benn's)? Or also the uncomfortable bit about his returning to earth to judge the living and the dead? It's easy to be selective.

Mission is about relating the story of Jesus to the world. We do not tell the story of Buddha, Mohammed, or Confucius. Nor we do tell a story of human progress through science, technology, or moral self improvement.

Mission is about getting people to agree with God about Jesus Christ.

But before we can do that we need to know for ourselves who Jesus is, and be won over by his story about God.