

Isaiah 49: 1-7
1 Cor 1: 1-9
John 1: 29-42

Many years ago, I was on a weekend away with friends.

We decided to go horse-riding.

My horse was very slow and plodded along at the back, which I didn't like.

Sensing my frustration, our guide handed me a whip.

'You will need this,' she said, 'if you want that one to go'.

Without hesitation, I gave the horse a big thwack.

At which point, it bolted, racing past my friends.

It wasn't long – inexperienced horseman that I am – that I found myself slipping round the side of the horse and finally rather spectacularly I was thrown clear.

I have not been on a horse since!

I was reminded of this story as I was preparing for today and what is the launch of a new sermon series at the Cathedral on the Five Marks of Mission.

Indeed, the more I think about it, the analogy of falling off a horse seemed quite apt.

When we think about mission, care is needed!

More of that in a moment. First a bit of history.

The Five Marks of Mission have been around for a little while.

While people don't always seem to tell the story of their emergence in quite the same way, it is safe to say that the Five Marks emerged in the mid-1980s and very early 1990s – with four marks of mission becoming five in 1990 when 'care of creation' was added (in the context of greater attentiveness towards the planet).

So, to set the series in context, we have:

The first mark of mission – to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

The second is to teach, baptise and nurture new believers.

The third mark is to seek to transform unjust structures of society and to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

To respond to human need by loving service is the fourth mark.

And finally, the fifth mark, as I indicated, is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

And it is fair to say the Five Marks of Mission have become fairly universally accepted in the Anglican Communion in the period since they emerged.

My job today is to focus on the first mark of mission

‘To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom’.

Mission is very important.

It is not important as a growth strategy because people are drifting away from the Church.

Mission is intrinsically important. It is important in its own right.

Mission, we might say, is a soul matter. It is a matter of eternal destiny. It’s about how we live as children of God, made in God’s image.

But if mission is important there are also great dangers in how we go about it and how we think about it.

There is plenty of scope, I would say, for getting it wrong (hence the analogy of falling off a horse!)

We need to be careful.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, when he identified his three priorities for his arch-episcopacy, said he chose not to say that one of his priorities was mission because, he said: ‘there is a danger that people will think that I am saying nothing’.

I think his argument goes something like this.

‘Mission is about everything. It concerns all we do. Therefore, there is a danger that we could end up saying nothing.’

And instead Justin chose ‘evangelism and witness’ as his third priority along with prayer and renewal of the religious life and reconciliation.

I am not going to get into a debate about the relationship between mission and evangelism – my colleagues can come back to this, if they wish.

But perhaps Justin has a point: there is a danger in talking about mission that we could end up saying nothing at all given its all-encompassing nature.

Or, to make a similar point slightly differently, we could end up just spouting motherhood and apple pie.

These dangers, it seems to me, apply equally with the first mark of mission ('to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom') – which is a kind of all-encompassing mark from which the others flow.

How do we bring these words to life?

How do we give them bite and traction?

There are other dangers too as we embark on a series on mission.

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom

It sounds very much like something we do.

And there is a danger that mission becomes all about us – our efforts, our schemes, our visions. Less about God.

There is a danger also that mission becomes about us imparting information to those who (allegedly) don't have it – Christian basics' courses – probably with us scrambling that information in the process, burdening it with unnecessary rules and regulations.

Do this. Don't do that. This is what it is to be a Christian. This is authentic. That isn't.

So, let's pause again...and see if we can do better.

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.

It trips off the tongue so easily. But do we actually know what that is?

Do we actually know what we are taking on if we commit to doing this?

I am reminded of that episode in the gospels when James and John ask if they may be granted to sit on Jesus' right and left hand in his glory.

Do we really know what we are letting ourselves in for?

Prepare to be crucified, I suspect, tells us something of the measure of it.

So, with these caveats, there are two questions which spring to mind in respect of the first mark of mission.

One, what is the Good News of the Kingdom?

And two, what is it to proclaim it?

Proclamation first.

Justin Welby, again, at the start of his arch-episcopacy, quoted St Francis, or words often attributed to St Francis.

'Preach the gospel at all times and where necessary use words'

And Justin said, quite forthrightly:

'Lay it aside, put it down, forget it. Don't even think about it'.

'If indeed St Francis did say this', Justin continued, 'he was wrong'.

We must use words, Justin asserted.

Proclamation involves words.

I'm sure it does.

And yet, when I feed the hungry, when I embrace the outcast, when I visit my abuser in prison...

...am I not proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom?

Surely I am.

The more interesting question then is what is the Good News of the Kingdom.

What is it?

If you hunt through the New Testament you will never find the word 'mission'.

It's not there. Mission is a modern idea.

What there is in the New Testament is a lot about 'sending' or 'being sent'.

God sends Jesus. We know that.

Jesus sends apostles (the word itself meaning 'messenger' or 'the one who is sent')

Jesus sends us.

This is the context in which we need to situate our reflections on mission.

Being sent.

In our gospel reading today, John the Baptist understands this.

In fact, he understands it very well.

Verse 32 and 33, John says of Jesus: "I saw the spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him"

And he continues...

"I myself did not know him but the one who sent me..."

The one who sent me

The one who sent me to baptise with water, John continues...

He said – and hear I paraphrase – look out for the one on whom the Spirit descends.

So, an awareness of being sent.

John the Baptist knew this.

Jesus knew this.

And so must we – if our mission, if our proclamation, is to ever be worth its salt.

But while great care is needed as we think about mission, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom is not about inactivity or passivity.

It involves action – stepping out, taking risks, being bold.

But, in light of what I have said, mission surely is first and foremost about knowing that we are sent and by extension knowing something of the one who sends us. Surely.

To put it differently, could we not say then that mission is about holiness before it is about action (and I say this as someone who is quite inclined towards action!)

Before we act, before we proclaim anything, we need to open ourselves up – once again to God.

It is called repentance.

To meet Christ, the rejected one, the crucified and risen one.

To open ourselves up to catch a glimpse of what God has done for us through Jesus.

And if we do this, if we catch even a glimpse, we will be unsettled, unnerved, shaken up.

But this is the place from which to proclaim the Good News.

And what is it that we proclaim?

The Good News of the Kingdom is wherever and whenever the separateness of life – loneliness, isolation, alienation...

...us being separated from each other and from God...where these things are overcome.

What was won on the cross.

That is the Good News.

Alienation, death, and brokenness.

These things do not have the last word.

The cycle has been broken.

It is the great hope which is proclaimed in Isaiah – our first reading. Babylon, the great oppressor, has gone. Yahweh has intervened. History has taken an unexpected turn.

And surely, we grasp this most clearly...

...we feel it most vividly...

...when sat with our neighbour, sat alongside the one who is cast out, the one who is rejected, the one who is shunned by polite society.

When we sit with them and when we break bread together – share food.

It never ceases to amaze me the significance of this simple act.

And, crucially, we know what the Good News of the Kingdom is when they bless us. When we receive from them. When they heal us.

Pure gift. Undeserved. Only grace.

So, to conclude, as we continue with our sermon series on mission, let us remember that mission – the mission of the Church – is not our possession.

It is not something we have.

Rather it is something we receive from the one who is sent and who in turn sends us.

Amen