

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Saying goodbye to someone should feature in that *Very British Problems* series, because can be so awkward. We may be spared this in the pandemic, but in ordinary times, how tactile should be we? Do we shake hands or hug or kiss? If we kiss, is it once, twice, or do we go the whole Parisian four? What's the right thing to say? Do we look back after we've said goodbye to wave one final time?

What we don't expect is something deep and profound. The words we mumble are well meant but usually forgotten because they are unmemorable. Which makes Jesus' final words to his followers the more remarkable because he sets them an epic task: to make disciples everywhere and to keep on making them. We make the assumption it was easier in the first century, as it was a naturally religious era, but this made it harder in so many ways. Jewish people were fixed in their understanding of God and wouldn't easily pick out a crucified man in an identity parade for the Messiah. Gentiles had more gods than Taylor Swift has Instagram followers and these gods made no moral claim on people's lives - unlike this Jesus. Meanwhile, Roman emperors were engaged in some serious cultic mission creep that would land Christians in the Colosseum. We do well to remind ourselves of their context, because it shows what can be done when the Holy Spirit is the wind behind your back.

When that Spirit came at Pentecost, and their informal lockdown ended, the disciples were full of love and fearless in their proclamation of Jesus. There was no wistfulness about this: no *'if only we still had Jesus with us we could show he really did rise from the dead'*. They *knew* they still had Jesus with them. And even if others couldn't see him, they soon would as they saw the love being shared and watched on as people were healed as surely as if Jesus was standing there.

We should not romanticise the early Church. It lived through serious conflict over its nature and several personal squabbles among its leaders that sit uneasily with what they were teaching others. But there was an unstoppable momentum amid the chaos of the new movement.

Today, the mission Jesus outlined in Matthew 28 remains in place, as fresh, relevant and needful as ever. But the context has changed and we need to figure it out for our generation as surely as others have had to. What does a disciple look like today?

St Mark's is starting a series on the five marks of mission, which have closely shaped our strategy as a family of churches in Rochester diocese. I am giving an overview of these five marks of mission today, to try and help with the question of what a follower of Jesus looks like. So, let's start at the top. There is no deeper allegiance we should hold. Following someone today is really easy: we just click on an icon on our phone and we get their social media feed. Following Jesus asks a lot more of us. In Mark 8, he says:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

It's hard to get a grip on how shocking that would have sounded. Today, it's a bit like saying: *if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their noose and follow me.*

We like to carry stuff around that makes us look fashionable. There is something ghoulish about a cross or a noose. But it's to remind those who follow Jesus that they have died with him. And that we are now alive in a new way, where we should no longer indulge our selfish wishes, but make Jesus the focal point. And we do this by living for others now, to bless and care for them. As Jesus said: *I came to serve, not to be served.*

The five marks of mission you're going to look at are priorities of the whole Church, but they also help to flesh out what it means to be an individual follower of Jesus. And here's what they say:

We should proclaim the good news of the Kingdom

Someone, somewhere, told you about Jesus. They weren't embarrassed or afraid to do this. Whatever anxiety they may have had, they overcame it because they wanted you to know how much Jesus loves you. It's true that some people have a gift of evangelism, a way of expressing the faith that really gets home. But we're all called to share our faith and we each have a story of God's work in our lives. We find it hard because we imagine we should always be looking for a chance to open our mouths about Jesus to someone who doesn't believe in him.

So let me put it a different way. The first duty in sharing our faith is to open our ears, not our mouth. To do some proper listening to others. That's how evangelism starts. Listening to someone is the surest way of showing our love for them. And eventually it gives us clues into what's going on in their lives and how God might be at work in them. Our role is to help them figure stuff out. The other thing about sharing our faith is that we do it mostly by living our lives. It's not what we say, so much, because words come cheaply. It's the practical things we do that show us for who we are. As an old saying has it, if you want to know what someone believes, look at what they do, not at what they say.

We should teach, baptise and nurture new believers

Some of this stuff is done specifically by church ministers, of course. But there is more to it than that. But we need to get some cultural hang-ups out of the way. In Britain, we think about the individual before we think about the group. We tell young people growing up that they can be what they want to be if they try hard enough and we celebrate Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, which basically says it's your fault if you don't make it. This makes us imagine we are each self-made, but we are not. Other people are incredibly important in helping us out in life. Human beings are social animals and we copy one another all the time.

In our faith we should never underestimate the power of imitation. People look at us, and they copy us. Every day we are shaping other people's lives. If we're following Jesus, we will be moulding them in his image. We each have that much power.

We are not disciples in isolation. Mostly when we look for support in life, we draft people in on our terms, especially if we have the money. A trainer to help with our fitness. A cleaner to sort out the house. A dietician to advise on our food. If we don't like the outcomes, we end the arrangement. Being a disciples can't be like this. We need mutual accountability, where we may be challenged because God has an uncomfortable habit of speaking to us through others. It's not about me, it's about us.

We should respond to human need by loving service

Our liturgy often talk about body and soul, but there are problems with this. The creeds talk about the resurrection of the body but instead we tend to think of disembodied souls in the world to come. And that means we can think the body isn't that important. We see this in some churches where any form of social action is thought to be a waste of time when souls need to be saved. But it is absolutely not a waste of time.

The prophets tell us that the kingdom to come will be very earthy and embodied. And we are to build signposts to it now. Whenever we care for the bodies of others, the kingdom draws near. Think of the early Church. It preached the good news and it also showed it in the healing of other people's bodies.

Social action lies at the heart of being a follower of Jesus. The pandemic has dramatically increased the needs around us. Our calling is to respond to this, as we have responded before. Words come cheaply today and people don't much listen to them. But those who care for the bodies of others are respected and trusted. It is a mark of mission.

We should transform unjust structures of society, challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation

It's not enough to feed the hungry and house the homeless, we should work to make our country one where people don't go hungry or homeless. The thing about sin is that it infects not just people, but the institutions, structures, policies and practices that people make. Our prophetic call is to identify the ways in which our nation is not shaped in the character of God and hold it up for inspection. That calls for humility, of course, because sometimes it's the Church that isn't moulded in God's ways.

Where there is injustice, people get hurt, and when people are hurt, God is wounded too. We cannot duck this calling, but it comes at a cost, especially in such an angry world when people are quick to attack those they disagree with.

But we should also witness to peace and reconciliation. Our country is becoming more polarised. We are being sorted into two big opposing camps who dislike each other. Looking at the United States today, you can see where this might go. The Church is committed to the common good. To a national life we can share in peace. The battle against ever greater polarisation may be the biggest prophetic calling of all right now.

Confronting injustice and violence is a mark of mission.

We should strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

The Bible looks at the world in generational terms. Children's children – those yet to be born - are not an abstract thought, they are front and centre. It's as if there is a covenant between the generations. Climate change and the trashing of the planet have become a problem for our generation in a way not seen before. We must react for the sake of those who come after us. And we should respond because this planet is his creation, not ours. We show our love for him by treating it and its diverse forms of life with respect.

It can feel like climate change is such a big question that there is nothing we can do personally to influence its course. But faith gives a new perspective. In following Jesus, we want to get the details of our life right – how we consume and discard the earth's resources matters to the one we follow. We do it because he made it. And in speaking of creation more than environment, we witness to our belief that there is a creator.

In the coming weeks, you will look at each of these aspects in greater depth. It's an exciting prospect and one sorely needed. It's never been easy or straightforward following Jesus. That's OK. He put that in the large print, not the small print. But right now, life is complicated because our culture is evolving at dizzying speeds. We owe it to him and to ourselves to figure out what it means, in 2021, to take up our cross and follow him.

Bishop Simon

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