

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MISSION

2. JESUS' MISSION AND HOW HE WENT ABOUT IT

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In the last lecture we looked at mission in the Old Testament. It was an exercise in biblical theology. In this lecture we will again be doing biblical theology, but at the same time we will be asking what it means for us in practice today. Our question is not just how Jesus saw his mission and how he went about it, but also how we might engage in mission the way of Jesus did.

1. APPROACHING JESUS OF NAZARETH THROUGH THE GOSPELS

Our focus is on the life and teaching of Jesus himself, the historical Jesus, the man from Nazareth. But straight away there are difficulties. We don't have access to Jesus apart from through the lenses of the various Gospel writers.

It's like looking through four different pairs of glasses. But there are many things about Jesus we can be fairly sure of. Scholars have done a lot of work on the sayings of Jesus and we can identify many of the actual original words of Jesus. Others have also done work on which bits of the Gospels are the Gospel writer's remarks—which bits demonstrate Matthew's theology or Luke's structural additions, or Mark's favourite words. These Gospel writers were not simply telling the story of Jesus for the sake of history. They were setting down what they understood as Good News (that's what 'Gospel' means). They wanted to get a theological point across. They highlighted some things. They left out others. They added a few details here and there. The words of Jesus vary a bit between the Gospels. And they arranged the events to suit their theological purpose.

In New Testament studies a lot of work has gone into identifying this editing (also called 'redaction'). It has helped us to uncover the layers which hide the historical Jesus from our sight. It's still uncertain, but there are now many things on which most scholars agree about the man Jesus. The aspects of Jesus' mission we are going to consider here are agreed upon by most biblical scholars.

My approach today is unusual. If you look at textbooks on mission in the New Testament, they nearly all look at the perspective of each Gospel writer, rather than at Jesus of Nazareth himself. I hope we can learn something fresh from this approach.

What were the features of Jesus' sense of mission, and how did he go about it?

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In Mark 1:15, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus says:

'The right time has come, and the kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!'

Jesus is the herald of the Good News. He also says:

'I must preach the Good News of the kingdom of God in other towns also, because that is what God has sent me to do.' (Lk 4:43)

The kingdom of God is referred to 149 times in the New Testament, mostly in Matthew (51) and Luke (49). In the Gospels, the phrase is always on the lips of Jesus. Matthew is very Jewish and avoids the name of God, so he calls it the 'kingdom of heaven'.

The kingdom of God is central to Jesus' teaching. It dominates his sense of mission. He came to announce that it was near. He came to tell those around him that a new way of living was possible, which involves letting God reign in our lives and in society. It will turn our values upside down. It will transform our relationships. It is socially revolutionary.

Jesus never defines it, but it is clear that it refers to the dawning of a new age in which God reigns. Strictly speaking, the Greek word *basileia* does not mean 'kingdom', that is, a place ruled by God. It means the 'kingly reign of God', which is a set of relationships, rather than a place. It is an active, gracious, kingly presence that changes people. The reign of God is not something that dwells merely in our individual hearts;¹ God rules over all creation and in the lives and society of all people. It is both in the future and present.²

Australians have a queen, Queen Elizabeth II, because she is the head of state for Australia, though it is in name only. But I am a republican. I support Australia getting rid of the monarchy and becoming a republic. A republic exists for the benefit of its people. Myanmar is a republic; the government is meant to govern for the welfare of all its people. A republic is similar to a commonwealth, which exists for the common wealth of all citizens. So when I translate the kingdom of God into language that speaks to me today, I often use the term 'the commonwealth of God'.

This is the central vision of Christian mission, that God will bring in God's gracious ways. God will fill the earth with God's transforming presence. A new order, a new commonwealth, will grow due to the free grace and surprising presence of God. And Jesus himself is the clue, the bridge, the herald. Jesus is the shape of this kingdom.

Question:

What are some of the things we learn from Jesus about the kingdom of God? Take a few kingdom parables from Matthew 13 as examples:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Mt 13:31-32)

¹Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament theology, Vol 1: The proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 101.

²David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 32.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. (Mt 13:33)

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Mt 13:44)

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Mt 13:45)

Gnanakan sums things up well in regard to a kingdom vision for mission:

Mission, then, involves declaring God's purpose to establish his kingdom, and is carried out by a people who in an anticipatory sense make this kingdom real. This suggests that the church must be totally involved in the whole of God's mission.³

3. BREAKING BOUNDARIES WITHIN ISRAEL AND BEYOND

Jesus was radical in including both the rich and the poor, both the oppressed and the oppressor, both the ritually clean and unclean. His mission is to break down walls of hostility, and announce forgiveness by God. One of Jesus' most radical statements was his command to love our enemies—nothing like this had been said before in Judaism.⁴

To be included was indeed good news to the poor. To be accepted was a huge thing for women who were excluded when they were bleeding every month, or lepers who were untouchable. The children, the suffering, the persecuted, the prostitutes—Jesus shattered the usual boundaries and said that God loves and includes them. What an incredible mission!

One of the big questions is whether Jesus directed his message at the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Reports of Jesus' encounters with Gentiles are rare and there's strong evidence that he concentrated his mission first and foremost on Israel. Matthew 10:5 has Jesus giving instructions to his disciples not to go to any Gentile territory but to the lost sheep of the people of Israel. Matthew 15:24 echoes this when the Canaanite woman wants her daughter healed and Jesus says he is sent only to Israel. Now this may be Matthew's theology inserted here, and not that of Jesus, but it does fit with Jesus' movements and his activities. Gentiles always approach Jesus; he never approaches them. The commissions to go into all the world are all presented in the post-Easter context.⁵

But Jesus says to the Canaanite woman, 'You are a woman of great faith!' (Mt 15:28). And he says something similar to the centurion from Capernaum (Mt 8:10). And the

³ Ken Gnanakan, *Kingdom concerns: A theology of mission today* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 131.

⁴ Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The biblical foundations for mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 159; Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 28.

⁵ Senior and Stuhlmueller, *The biblical foundations for mission*, 142-3.

kingdom is likened to a banquet at which the invited guests (that is Israel) will be absent and people from all corners of the earth will sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast (Mt 8:11). Tax collectors and prostitutes will also go into heaven ahead of the religious establishment (Mt 21:31).

David Bosch writes:

What is it that gave rise to the many sayings, parables and stories that seem at the very least to nourish the idea that, one day, God's covenant will reach far beyond the people of Israel? In my view [says Bosch] there can be no doubt: the primary inspiration for all these stories could only have been the provocative, boundary breaking nature of Jesus' own ministry.

[So, says Bosch] Scholars are today far more ready to credit Jesus himself with laying the foundations for the Gentile mission.⁶

I wonder what it means for us to embrace Jesus' mission to break down barriers and include those who are usually called outsiders. It seems to me that the liberation theologians are right when they challenge us to live in solidarity with the poor and the voiceless in the name of Jesus.

4. TELLING STORIES AND RIDDLES

How did Jesus go about communicating his good news about the kingly reign of God? He seemed to wander around the country with his band of followers telling stories and riddles. His stories, which we call parables, are amazing.

They are full of *paradox*, which means full of things that don't make sense or are contradictory. For example, unless we become like little children we can't enter the kingdom of God (Mt 18:3). Here we are, trying to grow up and be wise adults, and Jesus tells us to be like children.

They are full of *reversal*, where things are turned upside-down. For example, in the story of the great feast, those who are invited end up not coming and the beggars and homeless and cripples from the back streets end up being the honoured guests (Lk 14:15-24).

They are full of *subversion*, which means under-cutting current power-arrangements. For example, a lawyer who is respectable and knows his scriptures asks what the greatest commandment is. When Jesus says it is to love God and neighbour, he asks who his neighbour is. Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who helps the man beaten up by the road when two religious leaders pass him by. Who was the neighbour? The hated Samaritan is the good guy. The lawyer would have been furious. Jesus was suggesting that the leaders didn't care, while the hated outsiders had compassion. This is subversive. This is socially revolutionary.

⁶Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 30.

Jesus talked in *riddles*, which are sayings that tease the mind. For example, he talked about seed falling on stony ground and on good soil (Mk 4) but his disciples couldn't understand what he meant.

The Gospels are full of his *one-line sayings*. For example, 'Leave the dead to bury their dead' (Mt 8:22). Or, 'You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!' (Mt 23:24). They were mysterious and made you think. Sometimes they might make you angry. They were short and sharp. They were wise, but they were not the usual wisdom. He taught an alternative wisdom, a subversive wisdom, a revolutionary wisdom, a wisdom 'from below'.⁷ Marcus Borg calls him a 'charismatic wisdom prophet'.⁸

Question:

What can we learn from Jesus' story-telling? Could we preach fewer long sermons and tell more stories that indirectly invite God into our presence? Do you use stories in church or in sharing the gospel with others?

5. EATING, DRINKING AND CONVERSATION

While we know that Jesus did spend time in the synagogue, he seems to have spent much more time at table with other people, or meeting people on the way and just getting into conversation. He was even in danger of becoming known as a glutton—someone who ate too much—and a drunkard (Lk 7:34).

One of his deepest theological conversations was held with the woman of Samaria by the well (Jn 4). No-one else would talk to her because she had been a failure in marriage; in fact she was there at midday because no-one else would be there. But Jesus opened up a conversation that showed deep compassion for her and a willingness to discuss theology with a woman who was despised.

In Australia many churches are experimenting with connecting with those outside the church through meals or coffee together. We are having BBQs. We are running Alpha courses, which introduce Christianity over a meal. We are engaging in hospitality, something that other cultures have always valued highly. Jesus seemed to realise that to meet the people he would need to go outside the synagogue. He realised that when people are relaxed they are more likely to discuss a whole variety of topics.

Discussion:

Does your church ever invite people who are not Christians to a meal or picnic or outing? Do you ever invite others to your house for a meal? What are the challenges? What are the good things that can happen?

6. EMBODYING THE MESSAGE

In Jesus we see his life and teaching fit together as one. He didn't just preach that we should love our enemies; he loved his own enemies, asking God to forgive them

⁷ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 69–73.

⁸ Marcus J Borg, *Jesus in contemporary scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 28.

because they don't know what they're doing (Lk 23:34), even while they were crucifying him.

The theological term 'incarnation' means 'taking flesh' or 'the message taking shape' in Jesus. Jesus embodied his message. His was a truly holistic mission because we can't divide it into proclamation and social action. The way Jesus lived was totally congruent with what he said.

This was what Paul and the early church could see so clearly. In the Gospels Jesus is modest. He doesn't claim to be God's Son, and is so humble that he even doesn't even want to be called 'good' (Mk 10:18). But after the resurrection his followers came to see that Jesus was more than a messenger of good news; he embodied the good news. Paul calls it the 'Good News of God's son' (Rom 1:9). The messenger is now the bridge. The story-teller is now the story. The one who knew he was sent by the Father now sends his followers into the world.

Jesus' followers are called to live in love just as he did. We are called to include those who are on the outside. We are called to talk respectfully with those who are very different from us. We are called to embody our message. I like to say that we are to 'live into the kingly reign of God'. It's like leaning into the wind, or catching the wind in our sails, living by the power of the Spirit.

What does this mean for mission today? One thing is that our lives speak as loudly as our words. We are called to embody the message, to engage in 'incarnational mission'.⁹

7. BRINGING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

When Luke tells the story of Jesus beginning his public ministry it takes place in a synagogue. Jesus reads the scriptures and they are Isaiah 61, which tells of the promised suffering servant, empowered by the Spirit, bringing hope and good news to the poor and outcast.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Lk 4:16-19)

I was raised to think that he was talking about spiritual release, and spiritual sight. But that is not how Jesus' listeners would have heard it. They were ruled brutally by the Roman Empire. They were being imprisoned and oppressed. The sick and blind were excluded from the life of the synagogue. The year of the Lord's favour referred to the Jubilee Year, when slaves would be freed and land restored to the landless. This was

⁹ Ross Langmead, *The Word made flesh: Towards an incarnational missiology*, American Society of Missiology Dissertation Series (Lanham, MD: University Press of America/American Society of Missiology, 2004), available at http://repository.mcd.edu.au/73/1/2004_Book_Langmead_TheWordMadeFlesh.pdf.

revolutionary. Society will be turned upside down when God comes in fullness. This was indeed good news to the poor.

I come from a privileged country. We do have poor people there and churches do show compassion and seek justice. But in your country there are many desperately poor people. I imagine you are part of a 'church of the poor'. Jesus' sense of mission must burn in your hearts as you long for the coming of God's kingly reign. Perhaps you understand, in a way that I don't, what it means to long for release, for good news, for the sick to be cared for and given new sight, and for the voice of the voiceless to be heard.

If the worldwide church were on fire, as Jesus was, for releasing the poor from their misery, I think many more would join us in our mission.

8. CHALLENGING THE POWERS

I was brought up to believe that Jesus had only a spiritual message, and that the powers he challenged were spirits. I've come to realise that this is only half the truth.

There were several powerful groups in his society. First there were the Roman rulers and their soldiers. Jesus' powerful message threatened their position. His accusers said he was a tax-resister and revolutionary. He was crucified—the death reserved for insurgents—for pretending to be a king (Mt 27:37, Lk 23:2).

Then the Jewish king Herod was part of this power structure, as a puppet king under the control of the Romans. Jesus so threatened him that Herod became friends with Pilate, his former enemy. They felt they had to stand against Jesus together.

Then there were the scribes and Pharisees, the elders and the chief priests. Together they formed the religious powers, enforcing religious laws. Jesus was accused of blasphemy (being disrespectful towards God) because he spoke of being God's Son, of being the Messiah, of destroying the Temple and of sitting in heaven next to God (Mt 27:57–68).

As happens often even today, when a person stands firmly for the good, evil people get angry and work to kill them. The people and institutions who run society have a lot invested in things staying the way they are, to their benefit.

Walter Wink has suggested that the powers in society are more than just the people who are in charge. 'They are the systems themselves, 'the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships.'¹⁰ They spin stories that serve to keep themselves in power. They particularly like the nationalist story, which says that only by violently keeping the enemy away can a nation survive. This justifies the use of violence against anyone who disagrees with them. This is how the Roman and Jewish leaders treated Jesus, and that's how it happens in many countries today. Wink calls the powers 'the domination system'.¹¹

¹⁰ Walter Wink, *The powers that be: Theology for a new millennium* (New York: Galilee, 1999), 1.

¹¹ Wink, *The powers that be*, 37.

Now these powers include the government, the military, the multinational corporations and the super rich, but they have a spiritual dimension.

As we read in Eph 6:10–12:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Jesus' mission was to announce and begin the kingly reign of God, which is a totally new sort of kingdom. It is a 'domination-free order'.¹²

The disciples were slow to understand. One day they were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Jesus said:

'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called "generous supporters", even though they are lords over lords.

But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.' (Lk 22:25–26)

Now the powers aren't always and forever bad. Everything in the universe, including the powers, has been created by and for Jesus Christ. As Colossians 1:16 says:

[In Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

Wink puts it simply:

The Powers are good.

The Powers are fallen.

The Powers must be reclaimed for God.¹³

Question:

When you think about the mission of the church in Myanmar, I wonder whether you think in terms of political transformation—the road to democracy that your government says the country is on—or whether you see the spiritual powers involved as well. What does 'challenging the powers' the way Jesus did mean today?

9. A NON-VIOLENT LOVE

One of the keys to Jesus' mission to challenge the powers with the 'non-domination system' of the kingly reign of God was non-violent love.

¹² Wink, *The powers that be*, 64.

¹³ Wink, *The powers that be*, 31.

Jesus rejects violence. I find the most remarkable ethical statement he made was in Mt 5:43–44:

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy". But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'

When his followers want to bring fire down on the Samaritans, Jesus says 'No'. (Lk 9:51–56). When Jesus is being arrested and a disciple pulls out a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave, Jesus says 'No more of this'. (Lk 22:51). When the powers came to get Jesus, he didn't fight back, but absorbed violence—took it on himself— rather than be violent.

Most people would have thought that there were two ways open to Jesus—fight or run away. Jesus chose a third way, non-violent resistance.¹⁴ He refused to oppose evil on its own terms. He refused to submit to it. He chose an active third way—loving his enemies, living a new way, absorbing violence and transforming his situation.

The church, for most of its history, has not followed this third way of non-violence. It has often become part of the violent powers. I wonder what our mission would be like if we tried to follow Jesus in peacemaking?

10. A SUFFERING SERVANT

We can't talk about how Jesus went about his mission without facing the fact that it involved suffering. As I have just said, Jesus absorbed violence rather than give it out. He fulfilled the prophecies of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, which I mentioned in the lecture on mission in the Old Testament.¹⁵

As the famous passage in Isaiah 53 says:

He was hated and rejected; his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering.
No one wanted to look at him.

We despised him and said, 'He is a nobody!'

He was wounded and crushed because of our sins;
by taking our punishment, he made us completely well. ...

He wasn't dishonest or violent, but he was buried in a tomb of cruel and rich people. ...

By suffering, the servant will learn the true meaning of obeying the LORD.
Although he is innocent, he will take the punishment for the sins of others,
so that many of them will no longer be guilty.

The LORD will reward him with honour and power for sacrificing his life.

(Is 53: 3–5, 9, 11, 12)

¹⁴ Wink, *The powers that be*, 100.

¹⁵ They are Is 42:1–9, 49:1–6, 50:2–9 and 52:13–53:12.

If our mission is to follow the way of Jesus there will nearly always be suffering. I do not feel qualified to speak about it, because my path of mission has not led to any real suffering. But I know that here in Myanmar you have faced a great deal of persecution, suffering, even sometimes to the point of death for standing up for freedom. It is not just the message of Jesus that leads to it; it is following the way Jesus lived. He said to his followers:

If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. (Mt 16:24)

Question:

What does 'taking up your cross' mean for Christians in Myanmar?

11. ENTRUSTING HIS MISSION TO HIS FOLLOWERS

In Mark and Matthew Jesus' public ministry begins with announcing that the kingdom is at hand (Mk 1:14-15, Mt 4:17). Notice that immediately after this, in both Gospels, Jesus calls the first disciples.

The disciples are called to be missionaries. Calling, discipleship and mission belong together. Every follower of Jesus is on mission by definition.

Unlike other rabbis, whom students chose and sought out, Jesus called his own disciples. He expected them to give up everything for his sake.

His disciples never graduated as rabbis but stayed permanently as learners and followers (Mt 23:8).

They were also called witnesses, which is interesting, because rather than being called to pass on his teaching they were being called to speak of what they had seen and experienced.

The resurrected Jesus, speaking to the early church, said:

'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8)

We also are invited to be witnesses to and partakers in the mission of God through Jesus.

We are given the privilege of being invited to participate in God's mission, which was also the mission of Jesus and now is the mission of the church.

12. MISSION AFTER EASTER

For most of this lecture we've been deliberately looking at the mission of Jesus of Nazareth, what we might call the pre-Easter Jesus. But we, his followers, stand on this side of the cross and resurrection, and our mission is changed greatly by this. Our

mission is not just to try to be like this charismatic story-telling wandering prophet. We would fail, anyway, because we are not Jesus. We are not the Messiah.

It was only because of Easter that our Gospels were written. The cross seemed to say No to Jesus' life and teaching, but the resurrection said a huge Yes. The glow of the Easter experience coloured but didn't blur the memory of Jesus' deeds and words. The disciples' self-understanding was shaped not only by their time with Jesus of Nazareth, but also now by the risen Christ.

Mission now meant the proclamation and demonstration of Jesus' all-embracing reign. The reign of God was an overpowering reality, strongly associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mission was the first activity of the Spirit, as the disciples went out in power and proclaimed Jesus.

So mission is founded on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, but takes full shape in the explosive aftermath of his death and resurrection.

Question:

Looking back over the main headings of this lecture, which one jumps out as the one that would make the most difference to our churches if we followed it more?