

Sunday 18 April 2021

The Mission of God's People

People who know the story of which they are part

Reading: Revelation 21:3–5

Last week Gareth introduced a new series, looking at a subject that we are both passionate about and which we believe is of vital importance to this fellowship as we begin the long, slow process of coming out of lockdown and re-engage with our communities. It centres around the conviction that God is, by nature, a missionary God, that is, he is the God who goes looking for the lost. When we say we mean mission is not just something God does, it is who he is. So as we seek to follow God, we too will be a missionary people. Jesus says that he came into the world to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He added, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21)

From the very beginning, on that first Pentecost, Jesus' followers have been a missionary people. They immediately started to tell others of what God had done in Christ to redeem creation, and they did this in the face of every reason to keep silent. What made the first disciples such enthusiastic, single-minded, we might almost say, reckless witnesses? That is a question we will return to during this series. Today we look at one aspect of the answer to that question, and it is this: *God's missionary people know the story of which they are a part.*

If I were to ask you, why do we feel we ought to tell others the Good News you might answer that Jesus told us to in 'the Great Commission' (Matthew 28:18-20). And you would be correct, but have you noticed how little that command is mentioned in Acts or the New Testament letters? If it was that simple why did Peter balk at the idea of taking the Good News to Cornelius (Acts 10)? And why did James not refer to Jesus' words at the Council of Jerusalem when some challenged the practice of preaching to Gentiles (Acts 15)? I'm not suggesting that Jesus never gave that direct command, but it appears that until Matthew wrote it down some years after these events it was not widely known. So why did Peter, James and Paul feel compelled to take the Good News to the ends of the earth?

The answer lies not in one or two scattered verses, but in the whole of scripture. Remember that 'scripture' for Peter and the others meant what we call the Old Testament. As they looked at the ancient stories of God's dealings with his people, they saw that these stories did not face inwards, simply telling Israel they were the chosen race, but rather they faced outwards. Abraham was called to be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Israel was set aside to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6). Their whole view of scripture was that it was the story of the God who is on the move to save and to bless, and that he calls his people to join him and share in that work.

If we are to have that same missionary passion that we see in those early disciples, we also need to share that same vision. We need to resist the temptation to see the Old Testament as just that, old, irrelevant, surpassed. We must learn to see the whole sweep of the story of God, for his story is also our story. It is tempting to think that the Bible story starts with Abraham in Genesis 12 (with a nod to Noah for the sake of a good children's talk) and ends in Revelation 20 with the final judgement. But the story begins with creation of all things, not just the call of one man, family or even nation. It

ends not in judgement but with re-creation. We live between these two events. We look back and see that the whole of the cosmos, including you and me, exists for a reason. We can also see how and why all things, though created good, are marred and broken, and that from the moment the good plan of God was corrupted God has been on the move to undo the results of that fall and re-establish his plan and purpose. We see how God prepared the way and, as the Preacher to the Hebrew Christians puts it, spoke in many and various ways (Hebrews 1:1), through the patriarchs, the law givers, the judges, the kings, the prophets, the poets and the psalmists. Then, at the heart of this wonderful story, we see God's plan reach its fruition as God himself, revealed to us in Jesus, quietly slips in among us, lives, ministers, teaches and ultimately dies, clearing the way for God's plan to be re-established. That, of course, is not the end of the story. The victory of the Cross, made plain to us in the Resurrection of Jesus, opens a new future. The beginnings of that new future is recorded in the rest of the New Testament. Over the centuries many have joined the story, played their part, and left the stage. Now it is our turn, as we take up story and continue to point to the future God has planned for us.

Why is this story so important? If someone asks me who I am I tell them part of my story. Through my story I explain and make sense of my life: who I am, where I am, how events in my life link together to make me me. God's story answers all those questions, and more. It also tells us what's wrong in the world and why, but more than that it tells us the solution. Our story is found in the whole Bible. It is to be found in creation (because of which all human beings are responsible to him), in the character of God (as outgoing, loving, compassionate, not willing that any should perish, desiring that all should come to repentance), in the promises of God (that all nations will be blessed through Abraham and will become the Messiah's inheritance), in the Christ of God (now exalted with universal authority, to receive universal acclaim), in the Spirit of God (who convicts of sin, witnesses to Christ, and impels the church to witness) and in the church of God (which is a multinational, missionary community, under orders to share the good news until Christ returns).

We began this evening asking why the first Christians were so indomitably mission-minded—determined at all costs to spread the good news about Jesus Christ to every corner of the world they knew. And the answer, we have seen, is that they clearly understood the dynamic thrust of the Bible's own story line. They saw that story as the story of God's own mission, and they saw their own part in the story, participating in it as God's co-workers (1 Corinthians 3:9).

So, in the weeks ahead, we will seek to follow roughly the outline of the Bible's storyline, asking: what challenges and responsibilities face the people of God in their own mission in the light of this or that part of the story? We have selected parts of the story that seem representative of such missional aspects of our life as God's people. These are by no means all that could be said, but we hope they show at least two things: first, that we can and should draw our view of our mission from the whole of the Bible; and second, that when we do so, it becomes clear that the mission of God's people is vast and various, and that there is no better way than to follow.

Amen.

Kevin Dare
Knighton Baptist Church (Online)
Sunday evening, 18 April 2021

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How relevant are the Old Testament Scriptures for your understanding of our mission? Has your view been impacted by the content of this study?
2. We tend to explain 'the gospel' in the form of a series of propositions or doctrines. In the light of the whole Bible story how would you summarize the gospel in more narrative form?
3. What suggestions can you make to help us become more motivated for mission by having a better understanding of "the story we are in"? What impact might better teaching in this area have on our mission awareness and commitment?