

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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MISSION OF GOD

1st May 2016

Acts 16:6-15

John 5:1-9

Last year the Church of Scotland published a book to help the elders think about various strands of what it means to lead God's people. Called "Learn Eldership" we have been looking at different chapters in Session meetings, and benefitting greatly from talking about what we read. Last week the St. Bride's Session read the chapter (the chapters are very short) about mission. What surprised me was how much some of the elders were surprised by what they read. But when I thought about it I was not so surprised at all.

Many of us grew up hearing the word "mission" used as shorthand for what people who were sent overseas by the church did. People went as missionaries. They went to people far away in different lands, and they told them about Jesus. That is true, and it still is true, although now we tend to call such people mission partners, rather than missionaries, which emphasises that we are all in this together and they are going on our behalf and with our backing. Our current mission partners are Joel and Fiona Hafvenstein, who have recently gone, with their two small sons, to work in rebuilding in Nepal.

However, that is a very partial understanding of what mission and the Church's mission is. It is not just about taking the good news to people far away. Maybe once it was seen that way when we could assume that with the parish system everyone in Scotland was well anchored in the gospel and in the life of God's church – though maybe that was never really a very safe or accurate assumption! Mission simply means being sent. Mission is taking the good news of God's love to people wherever they are, taking it in word and also in deed. Our mission as the church in Laggan/Newtonmore is to bring God's love to our neighbours here, many of whom know nothing about it, and find it hard to accept that there is a God, far less that he loves us.

In some ways, Paul, who we read about today, and his friends had things easier than we do (in other ways he definitely did not – travel was not easy in those days and the physical dangers he went through were very real). Paul was mainly talking about Jesus to people who had few, if any, preconceptions about him. We go to people who in many cases think they know all about our faith and have seen through it. C.S.Lewis once said that it was like the difference between courting a virgin and a divorcée. (I'm not sure how much experience he had of this! When he did marry, late in life, it was because a divorcée courted him!) It is the difference between someone who is full of curiosity and enthusiasm for this new thing and someone who has known it before and had a bitter experience. We live among many, many divorcées from the Christian faith.

There is something else that we need to understand about mission as well, and it is illustrated by the story we read from the Acts of the Apostles this morning. This is that it is not our mission, but God's. That is very important. God is at work in his world, calling people to himself, transforming hearts and so transforming lives, and he is the one who is in charge of his work. He calls us to join in with him, to discover where he is working and work with him. But he is the master-strategist and not us – for which I give God great thanks! There is a theological term for this – of course, there is a theological term for most things – and it is *Missio Dei*, which simply means mission of God. We are called to join in with the mission of God.

The story we read this morning had some odd elements in it, as Paul and his friends were joining with the mission of God. The first oddity has them being forbidden, not by human authority but by the Holy Spirit, to speak the word of God in Asia. That would be Asia minor, which comprised what we know of as Turkey and bits of Greece, not the vast continent of Asia. Why were they forbidden? How were they forbidden? Luke doesn't tell us. I expect that the form of the prohibition came, not in words, but in weather, or in local conditions, in no one being prepared to help them with their travel plans, or charging more than they could pay, or something like that. I should think that at the time they would have found it hard to discover that there were places that they could not go with the gospel, hard to believe that the prohibition came from God. Paul and his friends were human, and like most of us, they wouldn't like to see their plans thwarted.

And then they tried to go to Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either. More frustration, more wondering what was going on. Many people look for excuses not to have to preach the gospel, not to have to take the good news out to others, but Paul and his friends wanted to tell as many as possible, and God would not let them.

Why not? Well, because where God was at work and where he wanted them to join in was in Philippi, a city of Macedonia. There, there were people among whom God was already at work and who were just ready to hear what Paul had to tell them of the good news of Jesus. There, there was a woman named Lydia who was to become a leader in the Christian church, just waiting to hear from Paul and have her heart opened by God to receive the good news. It was God's mission and this was where he needed these particular servants of his at this particular time. We know that the good news did reach the areas where Paul had intended to go and was prevented from going. But it reached there at a different time and by different people.

I love the times in the Bible when I see God's people serving in ways which they hadn't expected. My favourite story like this is earlier in the book of Acts when Philip is told by God to take the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. So off he went, thinking God was sending him to Gaza, no doubt. But on the way he met with the Ethiopian official, in whose heart God was already working, and Philip was just in time to explain to him the scriptures he was reading and baptise him in a pool they were passing. And then the Spirit of God took Philip, not to Gaza, but to Azotus. We may think that we are in a place for one reason, but God has his own plans and we need to learn to see where he is already at work and join in.

How often it seems to be the case that, even among his most fervent followers, what is assumed to be the divine plan turns out to be God's way of setting us off in the right direction before revealing purposes that we could have never imagined! David

Livingstone was convinced that his vocation lay in China. However, prevented from going there by the First Opium War, circumstances led him to Africa, where he is celebrated for his ground-breaking missionary endeavours. William Carey believed that God was calling him to go to the Polynesian Islands, but various contacts, constraints and opportunities, guided him to Kolkata and then Serampore, where he initiated the translation of the scriptures into several languages and launched a pioneering movement in India. And it is true too for those of us, which is most of us, who are not called to travel to serve in God's mission.

Jesus went around showing the love of God and changing people's lives, but he did not go to just anyone, but to those who were ready for his touch. (That was most of the people he came into contact with, or so it seems, and that should tell us something too, about the readiness there is to be touched by God's love.) Today we saw Jesus at the pool by the sheep gate where there were many sick people. He did not heal them all and the one he did heal he first asked "Do you want to be made well?" After all he had been ill for thirty-eight years. Begging and seeking help had become a way of life. If he was healed he would have to start his life again, in many ways, and who knew if he was up for that challenge.

But he was. This was God's time for him. He was ready to be healed and ready to live a life of healing and wholeness, ready to be touched by God's love. And so Jesus reached out and healed him. He knew where God was at work, and he joined in.

We are those who are sent to people who in many cases are wary of being healed, who are wary of the offer of God's love, who are wary of faith, because they or their parents, have tried religion and found it neither loving nor life-giving. They found it insular and restricting and even deadening, and that is a terrible thing to say. If you have ever been one of the first on the scene at an accident, when there is someone, or more than one person, lying in pain before you, you know that you have to temper your desire to help with gentleness. You don't just reach down a hand and haul someone to their feet before you find out what their pains are and their likely injuries. Acting too enthusiastically might show your well-meaning heart, but it could be the very reverse of helpful. When we look around us to see where God is at work, we need to remember to join in with his work in his way, which is gentle and loving. We come to those who are bruised by what they perceive of as faith, to those who are wary of accepting that helping hand held out.

But that is not an excuse to do nothing. All Christians are called out for mission, are sent to show and tell God's love. Being a Christian means accepting changes in our lives. Responding to God's love means accepting changes in our lives, changes for good, but still changes, and not everyone is ready for that. The man at the pool was ready, Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth was ready, and God sent his love to them. As we pray and as we live may we find God putting before us the people and the situations with which he is already at work, and may we learn to serve in the same way that Jesus did. Amen