

My Story - Today Richard & Helen asked me to speak about mission, and as I am now the missions coordinator at Leith, that makes sense I suppose. As some of you know, Susan & I (& Kaleb & Emma) have been back in Dn for 2 years after nearly 17 years in Cambodia with a NZ originated mission group called Servants. In fact the full name is Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, & the ethos of Servants is to reach the urban poor by placing people in slum & squatter areas in Asia (though we also have teams in London & Vancouver now too). And for our team in PP, our particular focus was on health work amongst the very poor. Since returning to NZ, we continue to be involved with Servants (I'm on the international leadership team), while I've also got involved with Rock Solid here in Dunedin, and the youth programmes we run in the southern part of the city. The saying 'think globally & act locally' is the logic behind those twin involvements for me.

But first I'd like to tell you how I ended up getting involved in missions, in fact how I ended up getting involved with Christianity, because it's a bit of an unusual story.

In fact, as I grew up, I became a militant atheist. At 10. Liked to argue. University. New Agey.

- Arthur/street people
- God's mission, not just talking about Jesus, but demonstrating Jesus; not just talking about the good News, but being the Good News.

2. How can we be a part of God's mission ?

The 1st truth we need to realise is that God himself is a missionary God. God who is perfectly self-contained could have been eternally content with that content with that. But no, in the heart of God is a burning desire to share his love, in fact to share himself, and to

bring order out of chaos, and bring light where there is darkness - so in the overflow of his love He creates the Universe, and out of the overflow of his love he creates us in his image.

It is this outward moving, loving impulse that causes the 2nd person of the trinity, Jesus, to put on flesh & blood & come to us with the message & the love of God for the world. This is the act we call the incarnation.

Many of the stories Jesus told, are designed to remind us that mission is at the heart of God. For example He tells us that **God is like a shepherd who will leave the 99 found sheep in the pasture so he can go look off looking for the 1 that is lost.** Now in some ways this should be a disturbing story for us, because we in here are the 99 - & Jesus says that God is very willing to leave us here singing our songs & enjoying our pasture while he goes off in search of the lost in the rest of Dunedin/NZ/ the world. That should say something to us about how we set our priorities & use our resources as a church.

In the story of the prodigal son, in Luke 15, we read that the Father is actually a long way up the road looking for the son when he returns, & then the father runs & embraces him. So Jesus is giving us a picture of how God operates – he is not a temple dwelling God who waits for people to come to him in the religious places, but he is a highway & byway dwelling God who goes looking for the lost.

And of course, Jesus himself sends his disciples (& that includes us) out into the world, out into the highways & byways, to reach & embrace the lost, the lonely, the least, the hungry, the hurting. And so as disciples – we have this same commission.

Now the question I started with was “how can we be a part of God’s mission?” – well in many ways that’s a moot question, because we already are. If we are followers of Jesus then it’s too late, we’ve already signed up & we are already part of God’s mission in this world. And indeed, God’s Spirit is constantly at work in our world, even & perhaps especially in the darkest and most chaotic and most broken places of this world working to bring light, and healing and renewal – and the only question is whether we are willing to join with him in that work or not.

Now I know we often get a bit despondent when we think about getting involved in God’s mission here in NZ. We look around & see that while atheism & new age movements are on the rise – nearly everywhere we look the church is in retreat, ageing, shrinking and closing down. And in fact until we acknowledge this fact, & the implications of this fact, we’ll keep on blundering around, trying to do business as usual, instead of realizing that we are now missionary church living in **a post-church, post Christian culture**, & therefore we are going to have to be far more creative & innovative than ever before if we are going to have any kind of impact with the gospel.

But here’s the thing - & I know this from my own experience. People may have rejected “**Christianity**”, which they see as a narrow-minded club that has done much harm in the world – BUT they have not rejected Jesus. There is still a thirst for Jesus, and a respect for Jesus, in most people’s hearts. In fact, I am certain that in every human heart there is a thirst for something of the Kingdom of God – whether that be for peace, for love, for justice, for an end to war, for environmental redemption - & so our task is

to tap into that, and show people how that longing in their heart connects with the gospel. Yes it's true, most people are no longer interested in organized religion – so let's give them **dis-organised religion, I say!**

Ok, lets go back to Jesus for a minute: the story that XX read out to us from **John ch 4**. In this story -

Traveling from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north, Jesus and his disciples took the quickest route, through Samaria. Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat by Jacob's Well, while his disciples go off to a nearby village to buy food. At about noon, the hottest part of the day, a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water.

Now, in this encounter Jesus breaks, in fact shatters a several deeply held taboos and cultural norms in the society of his day. We need to understand that the Jewish people & the Samaritan people hated & despised each other. As far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were a mixed race people, who had intermarried with the Assyrians centuries before. They were hated by the Jews because of this cultural mixing, and also because they had their own version of the Bible and their own temple on Mount Gerizim. So this encounter would be a bit like a white person in the 1950's going into a coloureds only bar in down town Mississippi, going up to the bar tender, & saying "Hey friend, how about you & I share a drink?". Very shortly the local lynch mobs would be out on the streets with their burning torches.

Secondly: he's a Jewish *man*, and she's a Samaritan *woman*. A good Jewish man was not supposed to make eye-contact with an

unknown woman, let alone stop & talk to her. Indeed the Pharisees would often walk around with their eyes fixed to the ground to try and avoid that happening by accident.

The third taboo, which I've already alluded to, was that Jews were simply forbidden to share plates or cups with non Jews, believing that their holiness as God's people would be contaminated by such contact with sinners. And yet Jesus asks her to lower her bowl into the well, fill it with water, and share it with him. No wonder the woman was so shocked. And throughout the gospels Jesus is constantly doing this. Whereas the Pharisees were at pains to keep themselves holy by not mixing with anyone, or touching anything unclean – Jesus seems totally unafraid of this – he is always confident that the power of the Holy Spirit in him is greater than the power of contagion in the lepers, or the tax collectors, or whatever else he encounters along the way. And this is something very important for us to remember too.

But of course there are even more taboo's being broken here. As the story unfolds, Jesus points out & we learn that this woman has **had 5 husbands & is presently living with a man in some kind of informal relationship**. One little tit-bit of info given to us at the start of the story is that this woman has come at midday to get water – i.e. at the sunniest, hottest part of the day when most people are resting or having their siesta. The strong inference is that this woman is an outcast, despised and abused by her neighbours for her life style, and that noon was the only safe time for her to come to the well, when no one else is around.

But instead of contempt and abuse, Jesus interacts with this

woman with love, with respect, and with genuine interest in what is really happening in her life – and in that fiercely patriarchal, male dominated society she has probably never been treated that way by a man before in her life. You see when Jesus points out that she has had 5 husbands & is in an uncertain relationship now, he isn't doing it to embarrass her or because he is acting as the Morality Police, but because he wants her to know that God her creator knows every detail of her life, every scrap of pain that she's been through, and is on her side. This is a person who would have been at the bottom of the pile in her community, economically & socially, and someone who may well have suffered a years of physical & sexual abuse at the hands of all these men who have passed her around. But Jesus sees her & interacts with her not on the basis of her gender, her race, her religion, or her sexual history – but as a human being, a person of infinite worth, someone created in the image of God. And of course we could have read the story 4 chapters over in **John chapter 8** when Jesus stands between a woman accused of adultery and those who want to stone her, and defends her till they finally leave her alone. In this story, in John 4, **this woman responds to Jesus by recognizing him, first as a prophet**, and then as the promised messiah. She becomes a witness to Jesus and his love, goes & testifies to friends and family and neighbours about the impact Jesus has had on her, the message of his Kingdom spreads, and many Samaritans become followers of Jesus.

So – what do we learn about mission from this story? Well for one, it reinforces that **the poor, the lost, the lonely, the broken and the oppressed – are at the heart of Christ's mission.**

We remember that in Matthews gospel the Pharisees demand to know why he spends so much time hanging out with sinners, and drunkards, and tax collectors, and he replies *“Go & learn what this means ‘I desire mercy & not sacrifice; for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners’” (Matt 9:13)*

The gospel is for everyone, but it is also – if I can coin a phrase – **poor-o-centric**. In his first public sermon, in Luke 4, when Jesus in effect gives his mission statement, he says quoting Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”*.

So we learn from Jesus’ example in mission, that God calls us out of our comfort zones. Jews nearly *always* avoided traveling thru Samaria, because of course they wanted to avoid encountering Samaritans. And most of us would do the same, that is, avoid travelling thru or to a place that’s considered dangerous. And so there’s a challenge in here for us as individuals and as a church - **who do we choose to hang out with (for example, are they all white middle class folk just like us)? And who do we choose not hang out with, and who do we choose to avoid?**

In this story, as in so many parts of the gospels, Jesus is revealed as someone who takes risks, who breaks taboos, who challenges & stretches cultural expectations, who crosses boundaries (geographic, cultural and racial), who rocks boats, and who is

absolutely unconcerned about his own reputation, or what people will think of him, or say & gossip about him. All he cares about is that this person he is encountering should know that they are a son or daughter of God, loved and invited to come & know him. And the clear message to us as followers of Jesus, is that we too must see each person *we* encounter – **regardless of race, culture, class, status, poverty, wealth, gender, personal or sexual history**– as someone of infinite worth, because they too are made in the image of God.

This is something that Susan & I learnt much about in Cambodia. For of course most of our neighbours were Buddhist. And living in a slum, most were painfully poor. And in our first few years there, when the AIDS pandemic swept thru, many of our neighbours & some of our dearest friends began to die. In fact our closest friend in that community, was a lady called Chantha, we ended up nursing as she was dying from AIDS. Her husband had already died a couple of years earlier, not long after we first arrived, though we hadn't realized it had been from AIDS. So Chantha's family of 6 ended up as orphans, tho a step dad stepped in to care for them, & we too continued to track with them. One of their son's, Phanna, was 10 when his dad died, & 12 when his mum died, & Susan & I were particularly close to him as he grew up. These days Phanna pastors a church in that community, so indeed, God brought something beautiful out of the ashes of that tragedy.

So the call for us as individuals & as a church is **this call to be missional**. That is - to focus on incarnating and demonstrating Jesus and his love in this city and this world, to be going out to the lost, the lonely, the broken, the hungry & the hurting. This in turn

requires us to be *more* concerned about getting out there and being Jesus *in* our community, rather than putting all our energy into running slicker & slicker church services in order to get more bums on seats *in here*. That's the difference between an incarnational way of doing mission – going out, as opposed to an attractional approach of pull them in. Both are valid & possible, but one is much more clearly the way of Jesus. Remember too, we no longer worship a God who dwells in temples, but **a God who leaves the 99 while he goes off in search of the lost**. We even have a reminder of this truth in John 4, when the S.W. tries to engage Jesus in a theological debate about which mountain & temple is the correct one to worship at. And he dismisses that whole argument by saying a time has come when God is no longer to be found in this place or that (no matter how sacred), but in anyplace by those who truly worship him.

So on a practical level, how can we live missional lives? As I learnt from my friend Arthur, I think the most powerful thing we can do is live our lives with open hearts, open homes, & open tables. As you read thru the gospels, do you notice how many times Jesus is eating at a table with a bunch of people – both friends & enemies? That is no accident or space-filler in the gospels. **Eating together is simultaneously one of the most human, most communal, and most spiritual activities we can ever involve ourselves in**. And it is one of the most missional activities we can be involved in. And so we don't need to gifted evangelists to be effective in reaching people – after all, as Lyn pointed out a few weeks ago, we are called to be witnesses, not evangelists.

The other thing we need to do of course, is ask Jesus to give us his heart for the poor, for the hurting, for the hungry & the oppressed. Remember Jesus said when we throw a banquet, don't just keep on inviting your rich friends & neighbours, but invite the poor, the lame, the disabled, and those who may never be able to reciprocate.

So clearly mission is not only about getting on a plane & traveling to Cambodia or to the Sudan, important as that is, but it is also about each of us leaving our comfort zones, & crossing cultural, social and ethnic boundaries and taboos and reaching out to anyone who is in need. I have used that fancy phrase **'incarnational ministry'** a few times today, but the best definition of incarnational ministry I have heard is this one: "If you see someone hurting, get your body there". That might mean relocating to another part of the world as Liz & Andrew have, or Anna & Stephen have for a few months. And I pray that will be the case for even more of us who are sitting here today. For as Jesus says later on in that 4th chapter of John – "open your eyes & look around – the fields are ready for harvest." But what we are desperately short of is workers who will roll up their sleeves & go out into that harvest. For some of us it could mean relocating to the other side of this city, to a part of Dunedin where there the needs are greater; for some of us it could mean a change of vocation, or asking God how we can use the vocation God has given us in a way that blesses the poor, the hurting, the hungry & the oppressed more. For some of us it may mean working less hours, so we can spend more hours working to ensure that the gospel of Jesus is heard and felt by those who need it most in this world.

But as always, the first step is that we pray, & open our hearts to God, & ask him how we can be more involved in his mission to this world, and more involved in the lives of those who are yet to experience the love of Christ in their lives.