

Mission and Creation

Matthew Anstey, 19 September 2009, Anglican Synod of Canberra and Goulburn

Introduction

I wonder what your experience of mission and evangelism has been. If you're like me, you've probably seen the good, the bad, and the unexpected.

My most unexpected experience of mission was two years ago.

Now you have to realise that I'm not normally overly forthright in evangelism...

I was waking up from a general anaesthetic for hip surgery. My surgeon had warned me before the operation, that after I woke up, he would have to come in and ask me if, well, you know, if it was all systems go downstairs! So sure, enough, he came in after the surgery and said without preamble, "Matthew, can you feel your testicles?" So similarly, without preamble, I answered, "Yes... And are you religious?!"

I blame the anaesthetic.

Is this is a "fresh expression"? Or perhaps "friendship evangelism"?

Well, I'm sure you have your own stories to tell on these matters.

And beyond just personal experiences, many of our parishes have mission statements. In fact, it seems like everyone these days has a mission statement.

Here is Shell's, one of the world's largest companies:

"Our aim is to meet the needs of society, in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally viable - now and in the future."

Almost religious isn't it?

Our diocese also has a mission statement, and what I wish to do in the two synod Bible studies, is to locate mission on the larger scriptural and theological landscape.

I wonder what you think of when you hear the word mission. Seeker services? Door knocking? Alpha courses? I wish to step back from these specific expressions of mission and consider the bigger picture.

So in the first talk I will focus on *Mission in Light of Creation*, and in the second on *Mission in Light of the New Creation*.

Jesus announced his mission statement in Luke 4, in which he quotes from Isaiah 61.

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...”

The mission of Isaiah, which becomes the mission of Jesus, is grounded in the Spirit of God. It takes its bearings, its impetus, its ultimacy from the Spirit of God. It is not something we initiate to assist God in God’s work; it is not a human-derived aspiration; rather, *mission is a divine initiative*.

And this divine life seeks the other, relentlessly moves out from itself towards the needy; it is centrifugal, moving from the centre to the edges, from that centre of unending contentment named as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to all that is not God, to all humankind, to creation, to the cosmos.

And this movement of the divine life has a particularity of intent, a distinctiveness in its grammar:

to bring good news to *the oppressed*,

to bind up *the brokenhearted*,

to bring comfort to *mourners*,

and restoration to *ruined cities*.

The divine mission is oriented to restoration, to setting things right, to what Paul calls the reconciliation of all things (2 Cor 5:19).

We make a mistake theologically, however, if we think that this language of restoration locates mission *primarily* as the response of God to sin and the Fall.

If mission flows from the divine life, its origin lies prior to all human history. God's being cannot somehow change as a result of sin being in the world.

Thus the language of *redemption* is preceded by and finds its deepest moorings in the language of *creation*.

Let's reflect further on this.

The Spirit who anoints the servant in Isaiah 61 and Jesus in Luke 4, is the same Spirit who hovers over creation, in Genesis 1. In the creation accounts, God gives humanity an identity, as the image of God, and a vocation, to be fruitful, to flourish, to care for the neighbourhood.

From all eternity, God is the good, the true, the beautiful, and the vocation of the cosmos and of humankind is to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful.

The mission of God is present in creation, because it is grounded in the Creator. And we participate in this mission through the Spirit.

This is where Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 come in and why they are so significant. They both reveal that the Spirit energizes our life in the way of God's mission.

Think about this – why does the Spirit anoint Jesus for mission, as in Luke 4? It can't be because Jesus is inadequate, or can't do it on his own.

No, the Spirit anointed Jesus, the perfect image of God, because to be fully human is precisely to participate in the divine life. To be the image of God, which we are named as in creation and which Jesus is without fault, is to be caught up in the mission and mystery and massiveness of God's trinitarian life.

So Jesus' life is more than a role-model or ideal that we strive to imitate. Rather, the Spirit is given to Jesus and to us for the same purpose: *so we can participate in the divine life, in God's befriending of all creation*.

Can you see the difference this makes?

It is not, "Let's seek social and spiritual and political wellbeing because God told us to."

Rather it's, "Let's join in with God, for *God* is seeking social and spiritual and political well-being"!

And *this* difference makes *all* the difference. Let me mention three implications of seeing mission as participation in God's mission.¹

First, **MISSION IS AN ECCLESIAL REALITY**. As one body united by the one Spirit, we participate in mission together. The communion within God is expressed in the community of the church. Hence the quality of our relationships is vital, and the diversity of missional expressions is to be welcomed.

Secondly, **MISSION IS INDISPUTABLY HOLISTIC**. It is holistic in creation, in Isaiah, in Jesus.

The well-being and flourishing of *every* aspect of human and environmental life are on an equal footing. The artificial division between saving souls and doing good is shown up for what it is, artificial.

NT Wright puts it this way: "mission must urgently recover from its long-term schizophrenia. ..The split between saving souls and doing good in the world is a product not of the Bible or the gospel but of the cultural captivity of both within the Western world."

Finally, **MISSION IS A WAY OF LIFE**. Because the Spirit anoints us for mission by immersing us in the Trinitarian communion, mission is intrinsic to our being. We don't simply do mission, or plan for mission, like the way we do Sunday services, or plan for a new rectory.

Mission is our calling, our identity, our life.

Mission is a question of *being* prior to a question of *doing*. Mission is a way of being in the world, a way of being in God.

And because this way is the way of God's life, it is characterized at its most basic level by trust and not anxiety, hospitality and not hostility, conversation and not coercion.

It is a life of trust – trust in God's uncanny knack of weaving beauty and life out of our wounds and weepings.

¹ There are many other implications. See *Surprised by Hope*, N. T. Wright, for a wonderful consideration of these issues.

It is a life of hospitality – making space for all, the tender nurturing of place and time and matter into welcome and beauty.

It is a life of conversation – the thoughtful sharing of words and silences, of discerning and lingering. And from conversation comes conversion, as Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch discovered.

Thus mission entails a life of contemplation – of attentive listening to God and self and neighbourhood.

To be honest, some of the things done in the name of mission make me cringe.

But *this – this vision of mission as an ecclesial, holistic, way of being in God and the world -* – this is the mission of God I long to participate in.

Jesus lived this way, and Jesus died so that it might become our way.

But don't think that such a vision of mission is simply a nice idea.

For out of this Spirit-filled, contemplative abiding in all the enormity of the Trinitarian glory, is born a life of the most radical action unimaginable

the bringing of good news to the oppressed,

the comforting of all who mourn,

the repairing of cities ruined and wrecked.

the binding up of the brokenhearted,

and the proclaiming of liberty to the captives.

May our mission be faithful to God's.

Amen.

Mission and the New Creation

Matthew Anstey, 20 September 2009, Anglican Synod of Canberra and Goulburn

Introduction

I love this diocese.

My son Jaden is five years old. About a year ago, I was putting him to bed one night and after I prayed he said, "You haven't done the B!".

"The B?"

"You haven't done the B!" he insisted.

"What's the B?" I said, puzzled.

Like a priest having had too much communion wine, he waved his right arm about.

"Do you mean the blessing?"

He nodded, the way four year olds nod with their whole body.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, may God bless you my son."

He has insisted ever since, without exception. If I forget, I never make it to the bedroom door without his little, expectant voice behind me, "Blessing!" I return, obediently.

I love this diocese, because Jaden asks for the blessing due to his participation in Sunday worship.

I love this diocese, because my daughters are growing up in a church with women priests and deacons. That gives me such joy.

I love this diocese because in it I have found my ecclesial home; I have found a way of life in God that is integrative, peace-loving, healing of so much of my brokenness.

I love this diocese because of St Mark's, its spiritual vibrancy, wisdom and nurturing community.

I love this diocese because despite the struggles of the electoral synod last November, we are here together today as one body, journeying together into God's good future for us, our new bishop at the helm.

So together, let's reflect on John 20, on mission in the light of the new creation, in light of the resurrection.

John's telling of the story of the new creation in Christ is steeped in creation language:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week,

Jesus appears on the first day of the week. Here is Genesis, Mark II. The first day of the new creation.

... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Peace.

Finally, there is peace.

I long for peace. And here it is. In Jesus.

Peace between God and humankind and the creation.

A peace that cannot be contained. Like a pebble dropped into the waters of our agony, it spreads waves of redeeming, rehabilitating love in all directions, leaving conversion in its wake.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

The Word became flesh. And this flesh has died, atoning for the sins of the whole world, and yet here it is, standing among the disciples, standing today among us, resurrected.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

As the Father sent the Son, in the Spirit-filled, holistic mission of Isaiah 61, we have been sent. In the new creation, as in the original creation, we participate in God's mission.

And then the finale!

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus “breathed on them” (*emphusaō*). This word occurs once in the NT. But it occurs six times in the Greek OT, the OT of the early church.

Crucially, it occurs in Genesis 2:7, “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed into* his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

It also occurs – and this gives me goose bumps – in Ezekiel 37:9, the valley of the dry bones, *the* great text on resurrection in the OT: “Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and *breathe upon* these slain, that they may live.”

Genesis 2 – creation. Ezekiel 37, the vision of the new creation. John 20, the inauguration of the new creation. The same Spirit of God, weaving the same grand story.

When Jesus breathes the Spirit upon the disciples, which is lavishly breathed upon the incipient church at Pentecost, the new Israel, *us!*, the church is incorporated into the Trinitarian mission of God without reserve.

The implications of John’s linking of resurrection and creation are far-reaching.

Because Jesus is resurrected from the carnage of his own wounded body, as doubting Thomas discovered, *this world* has everything God needs to bring its full renewal.

This world does not need to be destroyed in order to be recreated.

God saves us, then, not for celestial fire-insurance, but so we can be fully responsible, fully authentic, fully participating in God’s mission for the flourishing of all.

Yet, the light of Christ shines in the darkness. We live in the now of the resurrection but the not yet of the world’s consummation.

We conduct mission in the context of exile.

Mission in the light of the new creation occurs in a contested space.

Thus we need to put into place practices that nurture and guard our missional life, such as prayer, worship, word and sacrament, duty statements etc.

I want to propose suggest three specific practices that I believe are particularly important in our life together at this moment, for our diocese to stay its missional course:

the keeping of Sabbath,

the tending of wineskins, and

the cultivation of prophetic disturbance.

The Keeping of Sabbath

Think about Sabbath in Genesis 1. God *works* in such a way that *rest* is the natural endpoint. God works in such a way that God can rest, because everything else has been released into its own vocation.

Our work should result in us doing less and others doing what they are called to do.

So rest is *not* something we do in order to work even harder tomorrow. We don't rest just to avoid burnout.

We rest because God's mission is oriented to rest, we rest because the whole universe is anticipating its final rest in God.

If our mission and ecclesial work drives us into the ground, we've missed the point.

The Tending of Wineskins

New wine is not put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matthew 9:17).

A new wineskin in Biblical times is not necessarily recent, nor is a recent wineskin necessarily new. Rather, "new" refers to being supple, flexible, and having a capacity to expand. "Old" refers to being stiff, inflexible, and incapable of expansion.

So in each parish and diocesan agency, it is *not* your form of liturgy, or music, or sacramental practice, or average age, that determines your “newness”. The question is, are you supple, is there a capacity here for God’s new wine?

You may have innovative worship, sing the latest songs, and use the latest technology, but have no suppleness, no capacity for God’s inbreaking.

Think about creation and new creation. Each context has everything God needs to bring life and new life into being, even when the Spirit hovers over a meaningless void (*tohu vevohu*), as in Genesis, even when the Spirit hovers over a corpse – and even the most struggling ministry unit wouldn’t be described as a corpse! – as in the resurrection.

Your ministry context – picture it in your mind – has everything God needs to bring new life. As the Spirit hovers over your place, your dry bones are more than enough for God to bring to life.

So the question is, are your hands open to receive? *Our* task is to remain new, God’s task is to provide the wine.²

The Cultivation of Prophetic Disturbance

The discourse of mission in recent years has been inundated with fresh expressions, innovation, seeker sensitivity, and so forth.

But let us not forget that the gospel lived and preached can be deeply disturbing to the established orders, to principalities and powers, spiritual and political.

Just as one example, think about Sabbath keeping. Any move by the church to restore Sabbath keeping at a societal level will meet huge opposition from the retail sector, which is *a priori* intent on 24/7 point of sale.

So as we consider our parish mission, yes, we must be contextual, contemporary, coherent. But let us remain attentive to those ways in which being the people of God in mission may leave us a voice crying in the wilderness, prophetic disturbers *par excellence*.

² And note that the passage says, “so *both* (the new wine and the new wineskins) will be preserved.” That is, receiving God’s new wine is part and parcel of remaining new.

So I commend Sabbath keeping, tending of wineskins, and the cultivation of prophetic disturbance a vital practices for the nurturing of missional vocation.

These practices will help ensure that talk of mission will make us alive with anticipation and not extinguished with exhaustion.

I love this diocese.

But even more, I love this God of ours, revealed in Jesus.

This God of ours, Creator, Redeemer, Consummator.

This God of ours, befriender of all creation, lover of our souls, our rivers, our neighbourhoods.

This God of ours, who touches the heart of a four-year old boy.³

This God of ours, Three-In-One, vast guardian of all.

Amen.

³ Incidentally, I was thinking not only of Jaden, but also of myself, as I became a Christian when I was four years old.