

SERMON – 28/8/22
'Five Marks of Mission 1 - Proclamation'

Romans 10:9-15

“How can they believe if they have not heard the message?”
(Romans 10:14)

Over the next few weeks we are going to be focussing on the Five Marks of Mission that have had an important place in the Church of Scotland over the last wee while as Presbyteries up and down the country have been drafting their mission plans to tackle the significant challenges facing our denomination. There is a recognition that it cannot just be business as usual for us as congregations, just trying to get back to doing exactly what we were doing before Covid or just trying to spread resources more and more thinly. We cannot simply be about eking out the survival of the institutional church in a society that has moved on since the 1990s, never mind the 1970s or the 1950s or the 1900s when many of the ways we do things were invented. By and large, churches in western society have become known for trying to maintain the status quo rather than being agents of God's mission in the world, but if we are not to see the complete demise of the church (at least in something resembling the format that is familiar to us) we really need to wake up and smell the coffee, which is why I would like to spend a few weeks exploring this theme of mission. I want to say right at the outset that mission is not *all* that the church is about – we must also be about worship, about pastoral care and about discipleship – but those aspects of church life must have about them a missionary focus if they are to be true to what we were thinking about last Sunday when we considered the Great Commission that Jesus gave His first disciples, to go to all peoples everywhere and make them His disciples.

We are going to be looking at this theme under the headings of the Five Marks of Mission, which are proclamation, nurture, service, transformation and renewal, or they can be expressed, if you prefer, as Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure, but I want to stress right from the start that these are not a hierarchy of characteristics that we should be graduating through. All of them together are aspects or facets of mission which all require

to be present if we are genuinely to be the kind of mission-focussed church we should be as followers of Jesus together and as we absolutely have to be if the Church of Scotland is to have a future in the purposes of God.

We read this morning from Paul's Letter to the Romans and as we turn to this morning's passage now it is worth putting it in its context. The apostle has spent the first eight chapters of the letter outlining and exploring the Gospel message, looking at the fundamental problem facing humanity, namely our estrangement from God, and explaining God's response to that in sending Jesus to mediate reconciliation. In chapters 9-11 (from within which our reading this morning came) Paul then, as a kind of aside in the letter before going on to look at what it means to live out the Christian faith in daily life, addresses a question that was particularly pertinent to the early church, namely the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The main point (which is just as relevant to us today as it was to the first Christians) is that the Gospel is not just for 'our kind of people' – whether that is Jews rather than Gentiles (as was the case in the First Century), what we might call 'Kirk folk' rather than those who wouldn't be interested in the church, or simply our peers in age or culture or class rather than those of different demographics – Paul reminds us of what is written in the prophecy of Joel, that 'Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved' and asks the crucial question in our text this morning: 'How can they believe if they have not heard the message.'

Paul's argument here (as in so much of his writing) is relentless and incontrovertible. "Look, he says, here is the good news: Everyone - absolutely everyone, no exceptions, no-one ruled out) - *everyone* who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved." But, he goes on, how can they call out to the Lord if they don't know who God is and don't know that Jesus is to be trusted? How can they believe in the God who is revealed in Jesus if they have never heard the message? How can they hear the message if no-one proclaims it to them? And how can the message be proclaimed if messengers are not sent out? And those are the kind of questions we too need to be asking in our time.

But let's rewind a wee minute, because I'm not convinced that many people are actually even able to grasp that the church

should be mission-focussed, and that is because we have bought in to a lie that has been told so often by people within the church as much as by those who do not share our faith that it has been believed. It is said, and many people unquestionably accept the saying, that faith is a private matter. In our society, while people are entitled to their own beliefs, whether about God as much as about politics or morality or the rights and wrongs of vaccination, they are not entitled to try and change others' minds about what they believe. Perhaps it is a reaction against a time when beliefs were imposed and people were disadvantaged because of their unwillingness to conform to the expectations of those in power, and while I am certainly not suggesting we return to days when beliefs were policed, I *am* wanting to suggest that the kind of suppression of open discussion of ideas that masquerades for tolerance in our country is every bit as bad as the bad old days of conformism that have characterised periods in our history. I would imagine that most people here today would be reluctant to open a conversation about questions of faith even with a family member or a close friend never mind with someone you were meeting for the first time or knew only in passing. Stop and ask yourself for a moment: Why is that? For most people it would not be regarded as socially acceptable and in some cases it might even lead to your being ostracised from polite company.

My favourite definition of mission is that it is like when one beggar tells another beggar where to find bread. The need – hunger – is all too evident so when a source of food is identified, word spreads like wildfire. It's good news and nothing can stop it. The trouble is that in our social context the need – eternal salvation – is not even recognised as a need. We have bought into the lie that while the good news may be true for us, something that scratches where we itch, it cannot be assumed to be something that everyone needs to hear.

And that is when our society is in collision with biblical faith. In our reading this morning Paul proclaimed that we will find salvation if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, but for too many of us our belief (no matter how fervent) that God raised Christ from the dead is echoed by a resounding silence from our lips, unless you count what we are doing here this morning, lifting

our voices in hymns of faith and mumbling an Amen to prayers of faith within the safe confines of these four walls and an internet stream the link for which is essentially communicated only to those who ask for it.

You see, there's another lie that we tell ourselves. It is this: that because the Gospel is publicly proclaimed every Sunday in the church and that the church is open to everyone and anyone to come in and hear the message whenever they want, there is no need for any of us the other 99.4% of the week when there is no proclamation of the Gospel in this building to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord within the hearing of the 96.5% of the population of our parish who are not here or online or at another church. Wake up! The fields are white for harvest but they are free to harvest themselves if they feel the need. We all have an urgent missionary task to accomplish that we are singularly failing in. We do not ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the field any more, let alone volunteer to go ourselves.

Or does it not matter? Perhaps we have also preferred to believe that all beliefs are equally valid and that if you are sincere in what you think you should not be asked to consider an alternative way of looking at the world. That actually makes any kind of mission pretty much redundant and is probably at least part of the reason why the church in western culture is facing the decline it is.

Do you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead? Then surely that matters. Do you believe, as Paul writes here quoting Isaiah the prophet, that anyone who trusts in the Lord will not be disappointed? Then surely it matters if those who do *not* trust in the Lord *will* be disappointed. Do you believe that everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved? Well what do you think about those who do *not* call out to the Lord for help?

There are hundreds and hundreds of people all around us for whom the name of Jesus is nothing more than an expletive. They know nothing of our gracious, life-giving Saviour and Lord because no-one has ever told them other than perhaps in such a way that He is filed in their memory banks somewhere alongside Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. At a time when all kinds of

people have all kinds of questions about virtually everything in life we have a Gospel to proclaim, good news for all throughout the earth. "Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved." Paul's questions stand to this day: "How can they call to the Lord if they have not believed? And how can they believe if they have not heard the message? And how can they hear the message if it is not proclaimed? And how can the message be proclaimed if the messengers are not sent out?"

Can we be a proclaiming church, and I don't just mean here for an hour on a Sunday? Let the people of Kinross have cause to say in the words of Isaiah that we sang at the opening of the service and which Paul also quotes here: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.'