

'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans.'

'Your mission, should you choose to accept it, involves the recovery of a stolen item designated "Chimera." You may select any two team members, but it is essential that the third member of your team be Nyah Nordoff-Hall ... And Mr. Hunt, the next time you go on holiday, please be good enough to let us know where you're going. This message will self-destruct in five seconds.'

So begins the opening of a film I have watched numerous times, 'Mission Impossible', starring Tom Cruise as the protagonist, Ethan Hunt. It's one of those films where goodies turn out to be baddies, baddies goodies, and sometimes both! Mission, it seems in this world, is far from straightforward. So, after the tape-recording disappears in a puff of smoke the action begins. The last time I watched the film with my daughter, we broke one of our cardinal rules that no one is to speak during a film. But on this occasion only by explaining who was who, and what was what, were we able finally to understand the plot. I think.

Sometimes it feels that the mission of the church is just as complex, just as impossible as the one offered to Ethan Hunt. You'd think from today's reading that the mission of the church is pretty clear. Matthew says, 'Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom ...' (Mt 9:35).

But when Jesus instructs the disciples in their mission to proclaim the gospel this simple goal becomes oddly murky. The disciples are, for example, *not* to preach to the Gentiles and to the Samaritans, but *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. How peculiar! After all Jesus supported the Samaritans, his most famous parable used a Samaritan as its central character and he often mixed with non-Jews; at the end of his Gospel, Matthew, for instance, records Jesus' most famous 'missionary' instruction - 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19).

Over the past two thousand years, when pondering on Jesus' missionary instruction the Church has come to quite different conclusions about what mission is.

If you look in the Church Times advertisements, almost every church says that it is 'missionary' but what does that mean for us in a 21st century rural parish such as Bartlow?

Here is one now famous ground-breaking example which has become very influential. In the early 1980s Vincent Donovan had been sent by the Catholic Church to the Masai villages of East Africa to offer education in the church schools and help with the church's medical services. Very early on Fr Vincent asked permission from his bishop to be released from these duties. Then he took a bold step. Early in the morning when the nomadic Masai tribes gathered he would join them and tell them that he had come to talk to them only about God.

What he found very quickly was that this was not a one-way process and over the weeks they asked him challenging questions. In his book *Christianity Rediscovered* (1982) he wrote,

‘My education was beginning in earnest’. ‘The process followed was simple. I would mention a religious theme or thought and ask to hear their opinion on it, and then I would tell them what I believed on the same subject, as belief I had come eight thousand miles to share with them.... I have never been so tested in my life as by these sons and daughters of the plain.’

What makes Fr Vincent’s work so interesting is that first he ditched the idea that he was selling them Christianity, – he was not getting the Masai to send their children to the school or handing out medicine. What he was doing was meeting the people where they were; he was not imposing a top down ‘churchy’ authoritarian view of Christianity but engaged them in a dialogue of equals. What he found was that he learnt as much from the Masai people as they did from him. He had to adapt his language and the way he thought about his faith. He had a genuine humility and allowed himself to be vulnerable and open to possible failure, but above all he was genuine and committed to what he believed about the reality of God.

We have a model here for mission in our local context. We are not imposing church on the ‘unchurched’; we should not even think of people as the ‘unchurched’ but rather those who have their own values and beliefs and through dialogue we come to a fuller understanding of God’s presence amongst us.

An extension of dialogue is hospitality. When we welcome people into the church it is not to ‘convert’ but to express our love for neighbour and to live out our faith in the God of love and compassion.

When Jesus told his disciples not to preach to the Samaritans and Gentiles, he wasn’t limiting the mission of the church, but focusing their role. As Christians we are not called to change the whole world, but to work locally by being a visible presence in the community.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be like Fr Vincent and by being more upfront about your faith encourage genuine dialogue with those who are not Christians.

You might be surprised by the results.

PS - This sermon will self-destruct in five seconds.

Michael Wilcockson