

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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The Mission of the Church is the Mission of Jesus

The question for you today: Am "I" actively involved in the Mission of the Church? If you want to know what the Mission of the CHURCH is supposed to be at its simplest, then you start with the Mission of JESUS. And to do that, you can go to the Gospels. They can tell us, in Jesus' own words, what He was all about while with us here on this earth.

From Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, "Let my proclamation not be of myself, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with myself as servant of the Body of Christ for Jesus' sake." .. Amen. *[chapter 4 verse 5],*

Every Christian should be able to state in some form the Mission of the Church. That's because you are a member of it. If you've forgotten, or didn't have it memorized from your baptism or confirmation preparation, then you do what the writers of a catechism do, and you begin with the Mission of Jesus. And to do that, you do a little bible study in the story of Jesus.

As well, the leadership of every congregation in transition between Rectors is also called to review what they understand as the Mission of the Church, and how it is seen and activated here. So they too, usually, are encouraged through consultants and Interims to review their statements of Mission critically against the Mission of Jesus.

And it should not be taken for granted, and thus needs to be said, especially to those who will be on our Rector Search Team, that every priest who is a candidate for this parish should also be able to state what is the Mission of Jesus, and how that Mission has become theirs. Not all can; and thus few should be chosen.

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Good news for all of us students! The gospels of Matthew Mark Luke and John start their proclamations with the Mission of Jesus. Matthew and Luke, gladly, want to proclaim the birth narratives; Mark and John get right to it without those. But they all begin their good news with who Jesus is and what he's all about.

Thus we find the mission of Jesus, and it is ours as his church, and, yes, ours as his called disciples. And so we ask the question, “Am I actively involved in the Mission of the Church?”

So then, in the Gospel today we hear what the mission of the church is to be, AND we hear about Jesus' first strategic moves in making that mission operational, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I hope you don't mind if I start with the strategy mentioned – and I realize this puts the cart before the horse a bit because we haven't talked yet about The Mission. But I love the details of Jesus' strategy and I don't want to lose them in the larger message.

There is evidence of initial STRATEGY here in the Gospel, although spelled out a bit more in detail in the Gospel of Matthew, where Matthew says that Jesus moved from Nazareth to make his home in Capernaum. Yes, he moved. That's a Mission Strategy Move. Like so many of us have done over our lives in order to provide a base camp for what is taking place next: like a new job, or retirement, or the care of the elderly in our families, etc. Although less detailed here in Mark It still tells us that Jesus went somewhere specific, that is, not just anywhere. That's strategy. He went to the region, and then specifically the sea, of Galilee. where, in fact, was the town of Capernaum. So the mission begins with “to where,” and “to whom,” as we can readily understand in our own context. But I'll have to give up that part of this exposition on Mission to another Sunday and now let's get back to the mission itself.

Here is the gospel portion that contains the mission of Jesus in Mark:

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Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel (or the good news) of God, He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news." So simple yet profound; but he's not finished. Then, as he was passing along by the Sea of Galilee he said to certain fishermen, Follow me and I will make you into fishers for men."

Just to underline the point, from the same chapter that begins Mark, verse 38, and only a few days after calling four men to follow him, he said, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do." That is Jesus identifying his mission. There it is in print. And so simply stated.

Now, as parishes, because we are also encouraged to do so, we do take stabs at trying to create our own mission statement, or purpose of existing statements. Sometimes they come out so generic that they mean nothing. Sometimes they go way past simple into the most complicated things you've ever heard, complete with Episcopal language no one, not even the vestry and rector, can comprehend. And they wrote it!

If Jesus could ask a fairly simple question, "who do men say that I am?", and get a fairly simple answer back from Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." ..Certainly we could do the same.

In The Book of Common Prayer the catechism plainly says, "The mission of the Church is to re s t o re all people to unity with God and each other in Christ," and explains very clearly that "The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members." Well done.

Way too often we attempt to answer and explain all at the same time, and no one can state what that Parish, or Church or Jesus mission is without volumes.

Thus My personal counsel when creating a mission of Jesus statement for your parish, make it As simple and Christ-like as possible; if not possible, then avoid at all costs the error of expansiveness and obscure vocabulary.

Let's restate the mission in terms of us. I mentioned (and the Prayer Book says too, following scripture), that the Mission of Jesus is our mission as the Church. Here then we see in the Gospel that as Jesus went about preaching the good news, he immediately is preparing for that Mission to be carried on by disciples. As he went on Mission, he included calling

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others by saying, Follow me. So this is part and parcel of his mission, and thus ours.

So there it is: Jesus proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom of God, which was himself, standing right before them, and he invited others into the Mission along with him. So for us....proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, and inviting others to join us in believing in Christ, and serving the world in Jesus' name. If those simple things aren't part of your understanding of the Mission of Jesus, then you don't have the mission of Jesus that you are following.

The challenge, of course, that comes with any big audacious mission, and like any other task that is overwhelming, is to consider the Mission in smaller portions. Even Jesus, as the Son of God tasked with the salvation of the world began by the divine yet small beginning of a fertilized egg in miraculous conception. When as an adult after his baptism and anointing by the holy spirit, his mission began with not an entire world gathered at his feet (although representatives of the world came to his feet at his birth), but first on his focus on the Chosen People of God, and even then he did not gather all of the Jews into one massive convention, but with one Jew, then two, then four, then a village, then more villages, then open air discourses and displays of power, then Jerusalem itself, and finally crucifixion (which does not equate in our normal thinking for how to win the world), and then the Resurrection, and THEN, after the descent of the Holy Spirit, and his message being proclaimed, delivered and displayed by so many, many, did the task move into the realm of the nations.

A novelist asked how they work on such a major task or mission of writing a large novel, said, "it is overwhelming at first. But then it's the same as driving from San Diego to Toronto. One mile at a time, one state after another until you get there; one character, one thought, one paragraph, one development, one chapter at a time. And the overwhelming is brought down to measurable, doable, objectives towards the goal.

Perhaps the greatest struggle for a parish on mission, or you as the infidel disciple of Christ on mission with Jesus, will be staying the course.

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Standing firm. Keeping the task. As one Anglican mission's leader said, "The main mission is keeping the main mission the main mission."

We see an ancient struggle in Jeremiah's prophecy, where the reality of broken relationship is, as he says, "because they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the Lord their God."

We can sometimes get so far away from where we are supposed to be on Mission with Jesus' Mission that when we look back we don't recognize where we started, and then we question, "Is that REAALY what it's all about?" At that point it should be no surprise we wonder what we're all about!

One of **golf's** immortal moments came when a Scotchman demonstrated the then new game to President Ulysses Grant. Carefully placing the ball on the tee, he took a mighty swing. The club hit the turf and scattered dirt all over the President's beard and surrounding vicinity, while the ball placidly waited on the tee. Again the Scotchman swung, and again he missed. Our President waited patiently through six tries and then quietly stated, "There seems to be a fair amount of exercise in the game, but I fail to see the purpose of the ball. *Campus Life*.

Or as an anonymous wag once said, apparently with some personal experience, "When you're up to your neck in alligators, it's difficult to keep your mind on the fact that your primary objective is to drain the swamp."

Hopefully we repent and return, and in so doing, God's promise in Jeremiah is to not let us spin off into darkness and confusion, but continue to be his people, and he our God.

So when these stories of Gospel mission are read to us as they do so often in the season of Epiphany, it is the best of times to take this Gospel home with you in your ears, in your minds, in your hearts, and, remembering that life happens, and there are enemies of the Gospel to keep you off balance, have that prayer session with God of personal assessment and evaluation regarding your active involvement in the Mission of Jesus, as especially found through ministry in this parish.

As we do, then, ask the question, am I actively involved in the Mission of the Church? We have to start with the most obvious, Am I a disciple of Jesus Christ, prepared to follow him and serve him wherever he and his mission in this world should lead? St Paul said, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

When the question of discipleship is answered, then we ask the question again about our involvement in the Mission of the Church. And like Jesus, we will see such involvement beginning from your being actively involved, first, closer to home. Am I actively involved in any ministry in my parish? And if not, why not? At the same time, the leadership of your parish is tasked with answering the question, Is this parish obviously and actively engaged in Jesus' Mission? Are we positioned to create disciples on mission? The gospel today helps that parish's leadership and you answer that question.. It begins and should remain founded on the most simple expounding of the mission of salvation, and will expand from there as your Christ-given Spirit gifts are discovered and shared.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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