

Entering the Story of God's Mission: A Key to Parish Renewal

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These introductory thoughts have been prepared at the suggestion of our *Sense of the Faithful* group, and are offered as a discussion starter. Mission is a vast topic; a fleet of scholars could scarcely do it justice. However, in terms of key ideas, much of what is important in mission today has already been intuited by faithful Christians, whose insight tends to run ahead of that of the scholars. Sensing the new directions that have emerged in the story of God's mission, they are already generously entering the unfolding story.

Mission

"Mission" is a term widely used term, and it carries many meanings. It is also occasionally spoken about quite cavalierly, without much real content, in a "business as usual" kind of way. This is most regrettable since mission is more than a serious matter; it expresses the very identity of faith communities. And, given that the Catholic community has embarked on a demanding new phase of its missional journey,¹ members' imaginations need to develop in terms of its demands. Most of the Church's designated leaders have not, however, been educated or formed in and for contemporary mission. There is, therefore, much to be done. First of all, the challenge must be recognized, and then a response made.

While the spreading of the Gospel has been central to Christian life since the beginning, the word "mission" as a term to describe this has not. In the 16th century, St. Ignatius of Loyola borrowed a then secular word, "mission", and commandeered it for a religious purpose. Instead of denoting the settlements built along trade routes to supply ships bringing gold and other precious cargo to Spain, Ignatius utilised the word as a meaningful descriptor for centres in South America and post-Reformation Europe, from which he hoped the Gospel might

¹ A summary of important milestones in the post-Vatican II Catholic mission journey, along with a range of other introductory material, can be found in Jim and Therese D'Orsa *Mission in Practice*. Mulgrave: Vaughan Publishing, 2019, 36-39.
In this paper "missional" and "missionary" are used as interchangeable descriptors.

spread into surrounding areas. Thus, the word “missions” entered Christian vocabulary.

We may recognize elements of Ignatius’ practical vision in the arrangements being made for clusters of parishes in dioceses such as Melbourne at the present time, similarly described as “missions”. It is an arrangement that taps into Ignatius’ vision, but also draws on early ecclesiastical experience from Australia’s colonial times.²

Given that there is a degree of confusion about mission within Church communities, it seems best to concentrate in this discussion on some of the essentials. As generally used in society, “mission” means “purpose”. We are familiar with organisations adopting mission statements in which they try to spell out clearly who they are (their identity), and what they seek to achieve (their mission). Mission as purpose is also a good place to start in regard to Christian community life. Our mission is our **religious purpose**, and we gain our best understanding of its nature from a prayerful reading of the Gospels. Coupled with this we access the experience of faith communities across time. We also draw on analyses of context in which we seek to achieve our mission. Socio-cultural analysis must be undertaken with the help of various disciplines of learning such as anthropology, sociology, and political science, so as to orient ourselves in mission.

The mission of Jesus, the purpose and goal of his life on earth, was **to make present and meaningful for his contemporaries the good news of God’s creating and redeeming love**. This is why the Church exists; it is a worldwide community of communities intentionally committed to that same goal. Mission in this sense is **our very raison d’être**. All elements of our collective faith life must be, in one way or another, at the service of our fundamental purpose. No matter how good or important an enterprise may seem to be, it becomes excess baggage

² For example, the western part of the current diocese of Sale, to which the writer of this paper belongs, was originally part of what was known as the Brighton mission established by Bishop Goold in 1853.

that needs to be scrutinised, and possibly jettisoned if the community's mission journey is to proceed fruitfully.

As a result of the reflection on mission that has occurred in the Church in recent decades, there are rich resources available to guide us on the many **practical forms** that mission must take in making present the good news of Jesus in our complex pluralistic, post-modern and post-secular society. These forms include **pastoral care and community-building, prayer and worship, prophetic dialogue**³ within and beyond the Church, including with people of other faiths, **justice peace and reconciliation, care for the earth, education and formation**. These are contemporary forms mission takes in response to the context in which we find ourselves.

Mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways. Among these ways some have particular importance in the present situation of the Church and the world. (Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* #41).

Pastoral care and community-building are essential to the health of worshipping communities. Early Christianity spread rapidly because people could see that the life of most of the communities presented a powerful contrast to that of the society at large. Pastoral care and community-building are clearly good in themselves, but they also authenticate the prayer and worship of communities. Without them, prayer and worship become hollow experiences for those within the community, and utterly incomprehensible to those beyond.

Mission - Fundamental Shifts

The various changes in mission understanding and theology since Vatican II collectively constitute a **paradigm shift** in regard to the way the Church construes mission. However, many Catholics live outside this intellectual, spiritual, and practical journey, quite unaware of the changes that have occurred to its meaning and implications.

³ "Prophetic dialogue" is a phrase associated with the work of Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder. See for example chapter 12 in *Constants in Context*. Maryknoll N.Y: Orbis, 2004, 348-395.

The power of culture in human meaning-making and behaviour can be readily seen when we observe how Catholics – even ourselves at times - handle this paradigm shift. Patterns established early in life are difficult to change. Thus, even those fortunate enough to have had educational opportunities may all too easily equate mission with church building overseas, or with specialist personnel, even though since the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) they may have been introduced to a richer understanding. If this is the case, “mission” has become “missions” for whose success we are comfortable in praying and providing financial support whilst not necessarily being moved to other personal responsibility.

The paradigm shift from “missions” to “mission” has implications, the first of which is to reframe our thinking. This flows into many practical imperatives. One such is that a reworking of theological education is urgently required, as is the nature of formation for all Church members, particularly those whose vocation it is to lead.

Key Elements of the Paradigm Shift

- (i) The first is a shift from thinking about mission in terms of **to whom it is addressed to the nature of mission** itself – God is the first missionary at work in the world creating, redeeming and reconciling, a project in which we the Church community are invited to participate.
“The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”.
(*Ad Gentes* #2).
This is a central and much-quoted description of the origins of mission from Vatican II.
- (ii) A second shift is that **the goal of mission is to seek**, through prayer, study, and dialogue, **to discern where the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, and to place ourselves at the Spirit’s disposal**. This

implies moving out of our comfortable *modus operandi* and into discerning mode so that we can recognize God at work all round us. Mission requires an openness to the real questions of today's searchers, and the needs of the suffering. Ours is not, or should not be, a self-serving mission seeking simply to increase our numbers. We do, of course, hope and pray for more people to join us in the service of the Gospel, whilst aware that the invitation is ultimately God's. Our part is, through the vibrancy of our Christian communities, to create spaces where people will want to locate themselves spiritually and physically. Then touched by the joy of the Gospel as held within the community, commit themselves to mission.⁴

- (iii) A third shift is to recognize that **we need partners from beyond our faith communities**. In following the promptings of the Spirit to address the demands of mission today we are not, nor should we be, alone; we need others as dialogue partners – people of goodwill committed to the same goals. This is particularly important in forms of mission such as peace, justice, care for the earth, reconciliation etc. where the mission goals require partnership if progress is to be made.
- (iv) Following from the above is awareness of where **ultimate responsibility** for mission lies. In Christian understanding, this has shifted from the Church to God. God is the first missionary. It is God Who has been at work in creation since the beginning; Who sent Jesus so that people could understand the project of creating and redeeming love more concretely, and respond more deeply; Who at Pentecost, fruitfully enlivened further the partnership with humans, and Who continues to guide the Church community to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. We can trust God, and in good faith, cease to be over-anxious.

⁴ The phrase is the title of Pope Francis' 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, or in English *The Joy of the Gospel* produced to sum up and respond to the discussions that took place in the 2012 Roman synod on the new evangelization.

(v) A fifth major shift has been in a **better understanding of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom or reign of God**. The Church is not the kingdom of God, but is at its service. Again, the Church community, attentive to Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, must expect the unexpected. Jesus' kingdom parables, for example, always confounded people's expectations. The Second Vatican Council members rooted their discussion of the fundamental nature of the Church in terms of the parables of the kingdom in Matthew's Gospel. (see *Lumen Gentium* #5). Through the power of parable, Jesus the teacher provoked his hearers to think again about who is the good person and who is deficient and in what way; where the kingdom is coming and where it is not etc. The kingdom parables are all **process-oriented**, the kingdom revealing itself very much in the striving, the searching, the preparing, the planting, the growing etc. This is not necessarily music to the ears of Westerners who admire efficiency and results, and do not easily live with messiness and ambiguity...but that is how it is, and that is who we are. For long periods of history Christians tended to equate the kingdom of God with the Church. It is now clearer that the coming of God's kingdom, for which we pray so often, is a bigger reality than the Church, and will come in God's good time, not ours. The mission of Christian **faith communities is to be intentionally at the service of God's kingdom in public, private, and communal life**, in season and out of season.

(vi) Another major shift has been in the **location** of mission. Mission is not about other societies and cultures. Mission is, potentially at least, wherever God's dream for the world and its people is absent, or deficient. However, it is very important to note that vocations to cross-cultural mission remain among the special gifts the Holy Spirit continues to give. Living and working in cultures different from one's own is an exceptional learning experience and source of wisdom, and many of the most telling insights now shaping Church thinking and practice have come from those engaged in cross-cultural mission.

With the help of their experience, we are gradually discovering what it means to be a global Church. In today's globalised world, cross-cultural mission is very common, not least in our own multi-cultural Australian society.

As a result of the major shifts identified above, it should be clear that mission is both privilege and challenge for every Christian. Baptism involves a missional vocation addressed to all those who are privileged to receive it, inviting them to take part in the mission of Jesus in the world. The wonder and joy, and serious implications, of what baptism means need to be reflected upon more deeply. Furthermore, unless parishes are truly communities, **real communities of people who know and care about each other**, such missional vocations, instead of growing and becoming life-giving will wither and die, as seems to be occurring at present. The acknowledgement given to "Christian vocation" must be more than lip service; it must shape Christian life in a multitude of ways and settings, including particularly the parishes that constitute most people's primary Christian community.

Mission as Religious Meaning-making

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus speaks of mission in terms of the "kingdom of God" (the "kingdom of heaven in Matthew) - tapping into an image very familiar to his hearers. God is often depicted in the Old Testament, for example in the psalms, as a king reigning over the whole world. In the synoptics, addressed as they initially were to specific communities, the authors sought to contextualise the faith understandings central to Jesus' message in a range of ways, of which his teaching about the kingdom of God is a paramount example.

In John's gospel, however, the author does not present Jesus as using the kingdom of God image in offering the good news⁵, but rather has Jesus drawing on other images more meaningful to people in the Greco-Roman world to whom

⁵ In John's Gospel, the focus is on Jesus himself as epitomising his teaching. Jesus is the kingdom of God incarnate.

the gospel is addressed – images of word, life, light, darkness etc.. In John, Jesus speaks of “the work” his father has given him to do, a work to bring **the fullness of life to all** (Jn 10:10). “Fullness of life” equates to the synoptics’ “kingdom of God”.

One of mission’s serious challenges today is the re-contextualisation of faith. It is a topic that deserves much more discussion than is possible here. Central to this endeavour is making meaningful, and also doing justice to, such central elements of our Christian faith as creation and salvation in societies such as our own that are becoming increasingly individualised with declining attention paid to the common good. A limited, non-biblical, understanding of creation and salvation, one that lacks a sense of history, is held by many. They see these tenets of Christian faith as about the individual and God, having little to do, for example, with justice and human liberation. This can and does result in mission work that is similarly limited, the Catholic faith’s public and societal dimensions being seriously downplayed or non-existent.

Parishes as Communities for the Kingdom

God’s reign or kingdom is as much about our own communities as it is about the wider world which means that mission is directed both within and beyond the faith community. It has a “both-and” focus. There is always much to do to ensure that our own communities function as “kingdom spaces”, just as there is always much to do to create such spaces in the wider world. And the two endeavours are integrally connected. The efforts we make regarding our own communities enable them to be **credible witnesses and effective agents** of God’s presence in the wider world.

One of the tasks of faith leaders is to ensure that the communities are always challenged to exist for the sake of the kingdom and not for their own sake. There are few things more seductive than the comfort that comes from feeling that we have a good thing going, then becoming submerged in the satisfaction of it all, and forgetting why the community exists in the first place, all the while mouthing the word “mission”.

Also dangerously seductive is the idea that, once we get all our problems sorted, then we will be well positioned to engage in mission in the world. For example, we might take the view that, once we solve issues of governance in the Church, or once we achieve inclusion and equality, then we will be ready to engage in mission. The struggle to be authentic in these areas is vital, but we have to remember that **the kingdom of God is as much in the struggle**, assuming it is engaged with integrity, **as in the achievement**, desirable as that obviously is. Furthermore, the irony of our Christian life is that once we deeply involve ourselves in mission, particularly once we put the most needy – the suffering or marginalised in our society and world - at the centre of our consideration, movement often seems to occur in some of our most intractable problems.

Drilling Down to Bedrock in a Change of Era

Scripture is a central resource for missional communities, and in tumultuous times such as the change of era in which we find ourselves, we must seriously drill down to this bedrock. I suggest that the Bible, as a foundational resource for mission, has been seriously underestimated in Catholic life. We are more culturally attuned to the sacramental element of our faith life than to the word of God in scripture.

A caveat. The practice of cherry-picking mission passages out of the Bible to justify a particular mission direction is a common practice and can belie a kind of spiritual or intellectual laziness. The whole of the Bible is, in various ways, a witness to God at work in the world, so that **individual passages must be interpreted within the whole**. The Biblical witness is also a plural one with strands reflecting traditions formed in the life of various communities. These depict genuine but different aspects of response to God's mission as people came to understand it. We need the whole story with its multiple strands, its plurality, and even the ambiguity consequent on that plurality, in order to depth our understanding of mission and to remind us of its "both-and" nature. The very plurality is a circuit-breaker on those who think that one passage provides **the key** to the meaning of God's mission.

Take, for example, the post-resurrection Gospel accounts that appear in each of the four Gospels where we see Jesus giving a mission mandate to his disciples. These are to be found in Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:21-23. Without being in any way contradictory, these accounts differ from one another substantially. Taken together, they provide us with many of Christian mission's most important elements: being sent as bearers of the Gospel into the wider world; proclamation of the Gospel directed to the peoples of the earth, and to all of creation; baptism; bearing witness to what the disciples have seen in Jesus; the role of the Holy Spirit; forgiveness and reconciliation. However, the Biblical foundations of mission are much wider even than these important passages. They consist in the entirety of the Gospels and indeed the whole of the Bible as a people's witness to God's creating and redeeming love.

For those committed to mission, it is not a matter of becoming expert in the whole Bible, a project that for most Catholics would be not only formidable, but even impossible; rather the way forward is to start **to live inside the story of God's work in the world** as we understand it in our Judeo-Christian tradition, grasping its major themes and building knowledge and spirituality over time. This is not as difficult as it sounds, and confidence grows as we move forward. Much excellent work has been done in recent decades to help us to do this with exceptional leadership coming from Protestant and Evangelical scholars.⁶ For us, it is simply a matter of making a start in our communities.

From Truth-Seeker to Missional Disciple

The account of the woman whom Jesus met at the well (John 4:3-42) is one that has much to say about the new paradigm of mission. The woman symbolises all genuine truth-seekers of whom there are many in and around our own

⁶ Outstanding examples of these works include: Michael W. Goheen (ed) *Reading the Bible Missionally*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016, and Christopher J.H. Wright *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2006.

communities. The account also has much to teach us about crossing cultural, social, and religious barriers.

John's gospel is an extraordinary work of art. It is also highly stylised and symbolic. The character we know as "the woman at the well" represents all those prepared to enter into deep conversation (dialogue) with Jesus, and to take on the mission of Jesus as disciples. This unnamed woman was enabled to share the gift of love, respect, and friendship that she had received in her encounter with Jesus, and the spiritual insight that had accompanied this, with her own community. Despite being the most unlikely of missionaries, she experienced the joy of sharing what she had received – as St Paul put it: "the joy of knowing Christ Jesus". (Phil 3:8).

Decades earlier than John, Paul had undertaken his herculean journeys round the known world, engaging all who would listen, and founding Christian communities. It is, however, no disrespect to Paul and his achievements to say that, without the initiatives of countless ordinary folk, the Christian movement would have remained minuscule, and probably died out. What ensured its amazing growth was the "ordinary" Christians who were prepared to share their experience; to "gossip the gospel"⁷ in the marketplace, as merchants or crews on ships, or wherever life took them. For most of them this was not very far. In terms of Luke's gospel (chapter 10), these were the successors of the nameless seventy sent out by Jesus, two by two, well beyond their comfort zones to engage with others about what God had done in Jesus, and in them.⁸

Mission as Contextualisation

Jesus took elements of the culture (people's meaning-system) and skilfully used them to make his teaching meaningful, drawing on the natural world with its seasons, sunrises and sunsets, plants and animals, as well as the range of human relationships, the collection of taxes, business dealings etc. In today's parlance he contextualised his message brilliantly, as did the Gospel writers after him in re-

⁷ Michael Green *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, 173.

⁸ For an excellent treatment of mission building on Luke especially chapter 10 see Alan J. Roxburgh *Missional: Joining God in the Neighbourhood*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011.

contextualising the original experience and opening it up in different social and cultural settings.

Jesus taught by the choices he made about how he spent his time, and with whom. He formed disciples by a mode of apprenticeship, as it were, teaching and learning being done “on the job”, as well as in times of reflection and instruction apart from the hurly-burly. This seems to be a model well suited to today’s missional leadership requirements in parishes and other settings.

Essential Tools – Social Analysis and Theological Reflection

Because we live in a complex society, mission may need to take forms different from those of Jesus’ day, but upon examination these will be seen to be manifestations of the same fundamentals. Advances in human knowledge, for example, enable us to see that upholding human dignity and feeding the hungry may demand of us a deep and unyielding commitment to justice in the world, one which is accompanied by analysis and requires a range of partnerships if we are to make even modest progress.⁹

Serious theological reflection is also a central skill in mission. It is an example of the discernment that reading the signs of the times (Matt 16:2-3) in the light of the Gospel entails. There are many good methods, and groups must find one that meets their needs. However, to be suitable for purpose, the method chosen must include: the issue(s) being experienced which begin the process; the faith tradition and particularly the Gospel wisely brought to bear on the situation; action planned and carried through; and a reflective process undertaken in order to learn. If these elements are faithfully wrestled with, insight grows and it becomes easier to see which aspect of the issues should be the next to receive the group’s attention. It is an ongoing process, a spiral in which we never return to where we started, one in which the group grows in wisdom and effectiveness. Like Luke’s nameless seventy, we learn from our mission experience, take a deep

⁹ Many helpful websites provide assistance in undertaking social analysis. Readers will find those that link analysis into the process of theological reflection readily available and particularly useful in parish and similar settings.

breath as it were, and keep going. There is no retirement from one's baptismal vocation to mission!

The Missionary Disciple as Contemplative

An abundance of talent exists in our communities, and there are many people of goodwill in society who are willing and able to partner us when mission presents us with complex challenges. Beyond talent and willingness, however, mission requires the capacity for contemplation, for creating space to let God be God, the one who opens our eyes to see, who gives us patience when nothing is clear, and tunes us into what our experience is telling us. Contemplation is not "rocket science", requiring only a quietened heart, space and time for God to be heard, and resistance to any backsliding into a sense that mission is all about us. Mission is God's work, and the time for mission is always God's time.¹⁰

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Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3:15).

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Further Reading

For those seeking an introduction to major themes in mission theology and practice the following short works may prove useful:

Roger Schroeder. *What is the Mission of the Church?* Maryknoll N.Y: Orbis, 2008,
Jim and Therese D'Orsa. *An Educator's Guide to Mission in Practice* (Mulgrave: Vaughan Publishing, 2019).

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¹⁰ Among the plethora of helpful works, Ronald Rolheiser's *Shattered Lantern* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), provides an accessible treatment in terms of the contemporary context.

