

The Severn Forum

The Place of Christian Mission in the present Age of Multiculturalism

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Cheltenham
05 June 2018

Introduction

When I was growing up in São Paulo, Brazil, in the 1970s & 80s no one talked about multiculturalism. I do not even think I had heard the word until many years later. My life and the life of my church were all about growing the church numbers, evangelising those who were “lost”, telling people about Jesus.

People's religious convictions and affiliations fell under 4 main headings:

1. Catholic
2. Evangelical (which lumped all Protestants, Pentecostals & everyone else into the same pot)
3. Spiritists, who were the ones that practiced Candomblé, Macumba or Kardecists (Hippolyte Rivail)
4. Jewish

Brazil has a rich heritage of many, many cultures and even 45 years ago, in a city the size of São Paulo, it was clear that people had different backgrounds – São Paulo had the highest number of Germans outside of Germany, Japanese outside of Japan, Italians outside of Italy, Lebanese outside of Lebanon, and of course, all the millions of different African descent. It was indeed a multicultural place, even if under the surface of its “melting pot” façade there was racism and many, many boundaries. The church – primarily the Protestants – talked about evangelism within this context, but not mission. Mission primarily referred to something that was practiced in a place far, far away, such as the Amazon jungle or China.

Today I live in Birmingham, about a 10min walk from HMP Birmingham, in the Summerfield/Winson Green area. Routinely I meet “missionaries” to Birmingham – those working with Muslims, with Hindus, with the secular Brits, etc.

There are two Anglican churches within easy walking distance of my home and quite a few churches of other denominations. All with their strengths and with people who are working to see the church thrive, and with their weaknesses, some busier categorising the population than actually getting to know their neighbours. A thriving church is seen as one where the services are full people or at least that is moving in that direction. Of course there are many good programmes and good resources out there to help the church think about its mission and presence in the neighbourhood, to think about how to engage with others in a multicultural society. I'm not against a thriving, growing church. Not at all.

But I do question the ways in which Christians continue to talk about the mission and the very being of the church – is it very different in 21st century Britain than it was in mid-to-late 20th century Brazil? What are we missing if nearly all our talk of mission, if all our energy, focus and resources are about bringing people into the church and ensuring the church's relevance within a constantly changing society? Has relevance replaced love at the heart of what it means to be God's missionary church?

I. The place of mission in Christian identity

To examine the theme given to me for this evening's discussion I will use a few biblical narratives to orient and guide our conversations. First, let's think about the place of mission in how we understand Christian identity. For this, I will use what is probably a very familiar text to you. Leviticus 11:1-8.

11 The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them: ² Speak to the people of Israel, saying: From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. ³ Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat. ⁴ But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁵ The rock badger, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁶ The hare, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁷ The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. ⁸ Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you.

And the writer goes on, and on, and on. Why? Why do all these laws matter? What was their point in Israel's story? I propose it has a lot to do with how we understand the place of mission in God's redemptive plan for all creation. In what sounds to us as a rather ridiculous way, these texts highlight the uniqueness of God's people. By uniqueness I am not talking about what they eat or don't eat, what they touch or don't touch.

Throughout the book of Leviticus and in many other parts of Scripture, there are two short terms that appear over and over again in the Hebrew including in this text. The terms are "for you" and "but you." These animals are good to eat *for you*. These are the appointed festivals *for you*. The Egyptians and Canaanites erect carved images and pillars, *but you shall not...* those people sacrifice their sons or daughters, *but it shall not be so among you...*

From the very beginning of God's call upon Abraham and throughout the story of the formation of the people of God, this people was to be a missionary people. A people that would show in words, deeds and character who is the one true God. God said, 'You will be different so that the peoples may know who I am. It is through you that they will know me. Even your enemies will come to know me through you.' Mission was at the very heart of how Israel was to understand its own identity as the chosen people of God. It is into that grand story that we are called and into we call others.

The place of mission is intimately linked to how we understand our Christian identity. It is not that God is against lizards or hares or pigs. Rather, it is that God is for a people and calls a people to be his own, through this people to bring about a new creation. To be part of this story and to understand the place of mission means to be unique and distinctive in what is often rather bizarre ways and to invite others into this strange way of life.

It has been over 10 years since sociologist Steven Vertovec coined the term "super-diversity" to refer to contemporary Britain's new shapes of multiculturalism and the multiple ways we encounter diversity in the 21st century. We are moving towards living in societies where there is no clear cultural majority. Some say Birmingham is already such a city. Multiculturalism has always been around. All you need to do is keep reading through Leviticus, or think of the cities of Jerusalem, Rome or Philippi in the 1st centuries. What is perhaps a bit more unique is the intensity with which we encounter other cultures today and the ways in which identities, especially of younger generations, are blurred and boundaries are not so clear. What is mission in such contexts?

This is an ecumenical theological group. How do you think about mission and identity within such a context and within the wider context of super diverse United Kingdom? Consider these verses from the Gospel of John, chapter 17.

¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world,

but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

John 17:13-19 (NRSV)

II. The place of mission in ecumenism

John 17 is often hailed as “the” text for Christian unity and ecumenical activities. It is Jesus’ prayer that all may be one. Recently, at the 3rd international gathering of the Global Christian Forum, held in Bogotá, Colombia last month, there was a lot of conversation and debate about common mission and how Christians of such diverse backgrounds and cultures could genuinely share in an understanding of mission. Russian Orthodox and Korean Pentecostals discussing their understandings of mission and evangelism!

If I ask you, “Where are you from?” How will you answer? In Jesus’ prayer in John 17, Jesus gives us an answer to the question, Where are you from? He says:

Not from this world.

Now there’s a weird identity! What does it have to do with mission?

Jesus’ prayer is set within the context of Jesus’ love and care for his disciples. It is a prayer that mixes up present and future. In John 16:33 Jesus speaks of being of good cheer because he has already overcome the world, yet this is all before the crucifixion.

It is a prayer about unity and mission, and living as God’s people in a world that does not like us. It is a context and a world not that unlike the one that shaped the verses I read from Leviticus.

Jesus makes 4 requests in this selection of verses:

1. He prays the disciples may have his joy
2. He prays that they be protected from the evil one.
3. He prays twice that they be sanctified in the truth.

Yet, in a text about love and truth and unity and complete joy, Jesus says we will be hated.

The word of Jesus is truth and light. So why is it hated? It is hated because the type of holiness for which Jesus prays, the type of love which we are to show one another, is the type of love that threatens the powers of this world. There is a peculiarity of being a missionary people, called and formed by the Triune God, that shapes our practices and understandings of mission. Jesus prays that this little band of disciples will be so peculiar that those who meet them and see their love might actually think that they are not from this world.

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples becomes his prayer for us. This is our story, our way to understand the place of mission in multicultural Britain. It is an invitation that we join in God’s mission as Jesus continues with his prayer in John 17:23 – “so that the world may know...” The church is to be is a sign that points to Jesus and to the love that only he makes possible between us. We have no part in God’s mission if we cannot love as God loves.

The holiness and love that Jesus prays for is about displaying our radical difference, showing the marks of God’s ownership precisely as we understand the intimate connection between these marks and the place of mission today. It is a text about answering the question, ‘Where are you from?’ It is a text about identity

and belonging, where mission is about true citizenship and showing how strange is the life in Christ and how trust is at the centre of being God's missionary people.

If we do trust, then as Jesus says, we should expect to be hated. He had already warned the disciples of this in John 15:18. "If the world hates you be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own... Because you do not belong to the world... the world hates you."

It is distinctly uncomfortable not to belong, but perhaps this is exactly how mission needs to be understood today. This text in John pushes it further. It is more than uncomfortable, having one's identity and mission tied together in Christ it means you will be hated.

When we think of hate, joy is not the first thing that comes to mind. And yet this is the first request Jesus makes in this text: "I speak these things so that they may have my joy made complete" (v. 13).

Jesus is not asking them or us to laugh at hatred, to dismiss the suffering that so many Christians face for the sake of their faith. Not at all. Indeed there is a call for mourning, for lament, for coming together alongside those who suffer and who are persecuted. This is not a text that makes light of suffering or hatred.

This is a text about mission and belonging, about being joyful in our heavenly citizenship; about showing the peculiar people that we are because we have been called by God to be God's missionary people.

If you ask me, "Where are you from?" I might say I'm from São Paulo, Brazil. I'll say my grandmother was from the Tupi-Guarani tribe and my grandfather was half German, half Portuguese. I'm married to a north American and I live in England.

But no matter where I am – in Colombia, in the UK, in Lebanon or Tanzania, when I see the green and yellow of the Brazilian flag over on the television for a football game, my heart is strangely warmed. During the World Cup, I am 1000% Brazilian. It is not a thoughtful, rational decision, made under careful consideration whether ours is a good team or not. That does not matter. It is a joyful sense of belonging. My joy in being Brazilian during the World Cup is just a very faint echo of what Jesus is saying in these texts of John's gospel.

Jesus says, mission is about sharing that excitement when it comes to your origin in God. Be thrilled because you have been chosen from above, you are not of this world, and I have brought you together in love!

Where are we from? We are from another world, we are formed and chosen and redeemed by God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. That is the basis and the identity of our mission. We are called to show God's light, to be the joy and love of Jesus to those we serve. Through Jesus & the gift of the Holy Spirit, God has given us another origin, another belonging, another identity in which we are to be joyful. Jesus said to Nicodemus, it is an identity born from above and it is an identity that we share with Jesus himself. John 17:18: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." That is the place of mission then and now. Through our love the world will come to know the one true God. God's people are formed to shine the joy and love of being in Christ amidst all our diversity, difference and wonder. That is how to understand the place of mission today.

III. Mission as invitation and 'speaking people'

When we think about mission and the formation of a missionary people through the laws of Leviticus or through love and Spirit, a further question to be asked concerns the type of life into which the church invites those who are the "targets" of mission. Through words, deeds and character mission is about inviting others to join their lives to Jesus. But what sort of Jesus are we talking about when we think about the place of mission in today's world?

In Latin America we have all sorts of images and ideas about Jesus. Do we preach the revolutionary Che Guevara Jesus? Is Jesus the fat little white baby sleeping peacefully in Mother Mary's arms? In an age of multiculturalism and media, there are multiple understandings of Jesus out there which shape and inform the ways we understand Christian mission. Do we see mission today as inviting others to join the fulness of life that Jesus offers in John's gospel, to join something that turns the world upside down, as Paul and his friends are accused of doing in Thessalonica?

In his commentary on the book of Acts, Willie James Jennings writes about the place of Christian mission and its beginning in Pentecost. He argues, "Pentecost is the beginning of a community broken open by the sheer act of God. Indeed it is a community created by the Spirit precisely in the breaking open. God has come to them, on them, with them. This moment echoes Mary's intimate moment. The Holy Spirit again overshadows. This time the Spirit creates joining. The followers of Jesus are being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space of voice, memory, sound, body, land and place. It is language that runs through all of these."¹

There is a saying, "to speak a language is to speak a people." Pentecost is a miracle of hearing; it is also a miracle in mouths and bodies. God, like a lead dancer, is taking hold of her partners, drawing them close saying, "step this way and now this direction." Speaking another language is born not of the desire of the disciples, but of God. It signifies all that is essential to learning a language... this is not what the disciples imagined or hoped would manifest the power of the Holy Spirit. To learn a language requires submission to a people. Even in the person of a single teacher, the learner must submit to that single voice, learning what the words mean as they are bound to events, songs, sayings, jokes, everyday practices, habits of mind and body, all within a land and the journey of a people. Anyone who has learned another language other than their native tongue knows how humbling learning can actually be... "There comes a crucial moment in the learning of any language, if one wishes to reach fluency, then enunciation requirements and repetition must give way to sheer wanting. Some people learn a language out of gut-wrenching determination born of necessity. Most, however, who enter a lifetime of fluency, do so because at some point in time they learn to love it" (Jennings, pp 29-30).

They fall in love with the sounds... and if that love is complete... they come to love the people, the food, the faces, the songs, the happiness, the sadness, the ambiguity, the truth. And they love the place, the earth those people call their land, their home.

Speak a language, speak a people. God speaks people, fluently. "And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently, too" (Jennings, p. 29-30).

Learning to 'speak people' fluently', is what Christian mission is about. We have no part in God's mission if we cannot learn to love as God loves. And that is learning 'to speak people' because God loves all of God's creation and because in the Incarnation, God showed us what it means to be human.

The wonder of the book of Acts is that the Spirit opens up this revolution and shapes the church in ways that none of its leaders, none of Christ's followers or their enemies could have imagined. The Spirit creates something new. The Spirit is still creating something new and that is the miracle of the place of Christian mission in today's world.

IV. The edge effect

In the natural sciences there is the concept of the 'edge effect.' You might have a lake and forest, a field and a stream. The edge is the place, or the places, where these two different eco systems meet. Biologists have found that while each separate sphere might have life that is unique to itself, there are forms of life

¹ *Acts*, in the series *Belief: A theological commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2017, p. 30.

that can only exist at the edge. They do not thrive in the forest on their own or in the lake. They thrive only at the edge. It is a niche species made possible because of the edge.

Could it be that part of the place of mission is learning to learn to live at the edges? Learning how to be new together – this is the niche species that the Spirit makes possible.

Christians who know and are willing to meet other people, encounter them and befriend them in ways that move beyond just trying to get them from their eco system into the church or just trying to live in the eco-system of ‘multi-cultural Britain.’

In Acts 10 we read the story of the encounter between Cornelius and Peter. You know the narrative. Peter is on the roof. He is tired and hungry and falls into a trance. That great sheet comes down with all sorts of unclean animals, the sorts of food he, as a good Jew, should not eat. Despite numerous attempts to get him to eat, he refuses. Eventually he accepts the invitation to go to meet Cornelius and travels with his friends to Cornelius’ home. There the Spirit of God does amazing things and both Peter and Cornelius are surprised and in wonder.

Acts 10 is an edge effect. Peter is one eco-system: the Jewish expression of God’s people, who knows what it means to be a people constituted by Torah and to live accordingly. Cornelius is the other eco-system – the Gentiles, the outsiders. Each can only exist as they are in their separate eco-systems. But then the Spirit interrupts them both and makes possible something new.

The place of mission in this text is not about getting Peter to become a Gentile or Cornelius to become a Jew. It is about a new niche species made possible only at that edge, made possible only because of the Holy Spirit. It is also about tending the edges. In human ecology that diversity created by the Spirit has to be tended. Multiculturalism can be harmful and violent, or it can be beneficial and totally new.

It took the vision of sheet of unclean animals for Peter to go to the edge. It is always more comfortable to stay in your habitat.

How is the Christian understanding of mission tending the edges? Are we attuned to the edges at all and willing, like Peter, actually to go and to be transformed.

What are we losing if we do not? It was as if Peter and Cornelius are on two sides of a very big wall. The Spirit of God was speaking to both of them. Had they not encountered one another, each would not have heard what the Spirit was saying to the other. What are we not hearing because we are not tending to the edges? In all our work for the church and engagement with people of other traditions, whose voices are we not hearing? And why? These are crucial questions for how we understand and practice Christian mission today.

It is fundamental to understand that Peter did not want or pray or desire to listen to Cornelius. He thought he could be a very good follower of Jesus without doing anything with Gentiles. But the Spirit showed him that in fact, he was not being faithful to God’s call to mission, he was not following Jesus at all if he was not going to hear the voices of others and be transformed himself.

A number of years ago I had the privilege to participate in a drafting group for the document, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*.² You may know the text. It was a joint project of the PCPCU, WCC and WEA. It started off as an inter-faith project, but pretty quickly the representatives of other faiths told the Christians, ‘You can’t even agree amongst yourselves about the ethics of witness and mission. How do you expect to come to an agreement with all of us?’

² Available in various languages at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>

So it became an intra-Christian project between the three Christian bodies: WCC, PCID and WEA. One of the extraordinary things about those meetings that came out as we gathered over the course of 4-5 years was the time and patience it takes to build friendships with people who are very different from us. Those meetings were an edge that needed patient and careful tending. It was a project in learning to speak ‘people’ – all people, with all their criticisms, theological differences, liturgical practices. It was hard work. And it’s not over. That is the challenge of the Holy Spirit in Acts, the challenge that God puts to us about how we understand mission. Are we willing to be that disrupted, that uncomfortable, that unpopular for the sake of hearing the Spirit’s voice even in the ones we really don’t get along with or agree with?

Finally, the place of mission in multicultural Britain has to do with food and hospitality. As we learned from Leviticus, from the very beginning God’s people are to be unique for the sake of mission. As we learned from John, this uniqueness comes partly from our heavenly citizenship and the ways in which we learn to share that identity with others. The place of mission is at the edges, where God makes possible certain forms of belonging that are not possible elsewhere. Those people – Peter, Cornelius and so many others in the book of Acts for whom mission became belonging to one another in new and surprising ways, they did not even know what to call themselves. They became people of the Way. They shared food and hospitality but most of all, Peter learned that mission is much more about following than controlling and strategizing. It is about God being the host, not us. Peter had to go to Cornelius; he went to where did not want to be and to converse with those who were, in his cultural-religious world, unclean. Through his encounter with Cornelius, Peter learned that mission is about learning to speak people. Learning to speak ‘people’ means being far less concerned with being relevant, and much more concerned about learning to love, to desire as God desires, which means going and tending to those edges where we will encounter all that is multicultural and even ‘unclean’ for us, and seeing that God has made it clean.

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