

THOUGHTS FOR MISSION SUNDAY

Our childhood understanding of “Mission” got as far as the “foreign missions” – and rightly, because reaching out to all nations continues what we see in the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, that is where we should often look to remind ourselves of what we are part of. But an adult understanding of “Mission” involves more, and takes seriously the unfolding nature of mission in different historical situations.

The only mission the Church can have is its participation in the Missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Today’s first reading (Zacharia) reminds us of how the Jewish people were to understand their mission, foretelling the day when ‘all nations will seek God in Jerusalem.’ To understand that calling properly, we need to go back to when Abram was called by God (Genesis 12:1) – a calling so special that Abram’s name was changed to Abraham (“the father of multitudes”). God promised that he would “make of him a great nation,” which later prophets would describe as “people of the covenant,” “God’s people,” a “holy people” identified by possession of their own land.

Imagine what that would lead to if it had no meaning beyond its literal meaning, applying exclusively to the nation of Israel. But the very next verse in Genesis (v 2) prevents that narrow meaning – it reminds us that all nations would be blessed by Abraham’s calling. Later prophets would often remind the people that God’s blessing on them was but a sign of what God intended for all nations. Their journey through history was to point to a future “new covenant” and a “promised land” that transcends all boundaries. The New Testament is replete with references to a new “people of God,” and a “new covenant” – though sometimes it continued to use Old Testament imagery to describe this new people of God. The name “Jerusalem” is one of those images, but in the New Testament it is the “new Jerusalem” that will “come down, out of Heaven” i.e. is of God’s making. It signified God’s presence among us, but turned out to be not a temple at all, but God’s own self; (Rev 22: 2,22)

The Israelites learned only gradually this wider, all-inclusive dimension of their own calling. Their alternating experiences of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, of exile and return, of destruction and restoration, were all part of that learning journey. Even their experience of God with them during exile was to help them realise that God’s presence was not limited to their territorial boundaries.

But some never learned that lesson; they stuck to an exclusive, literal interpretation of their scriptures. For them, “people of God” meant the nation of Israel; the land God promised was the State of Israel... Scholars have noted that the literal interpretation of religious texts is usually linked to ideology, including nationalism (“the crudest form of nationalism, Martin Buber), colonialism, empire and militarism... We have seen this playing out in our own day. We also see how those who espouse rigorous religious attitudes are often the same who espouse hard right political positions. Exclusivism of any kind (Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Protestant, Catholic...) all involve a narrow understanding of mission, of salvation, and of God’s will.

Such distortions show up in behaviour that is inhuman. It is no coincidence that Pope St John Paul II could describe the Church’s mission in terms of the dignity and rights of persons: “The human person is the primary route the Church must take in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way of the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself” (RH, 14). For the same reason, he warned the Churches of Oceania against falling into “ecclesial introversion.” Pope Francis echoed this when he dreamed of a way of being Church that is “suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her own self-preservation.” (EG 27) “Building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12) includes, but means more than, conversions and building up the Church.

Jesus' ways of doing good, healing, restoring dignity, and opposing sinful structures have traditionally been continued in the ways Religious Orders and lay missionaries have taken health care and education to indigenous peoples, on a huge scale. Add to that the Church's strong teachings concerning human dignity and human rights, and its "prophetic" role of doing good in the ordinary, humble circumstances of daily life, or denouncing the misuse of power on high - by whomever. Anything less than these ways of putting the gospel into practice falls short of what the Church means today by "mission." In fact, it is even counter-productive:

Mission is not to be confused with proselytism, the mere effort to increase the number of church members. Evangelisation is the process of incarnating the Gospel, the Word of God, into a living culture – into the way people live and think. Evangelisation is about inculturation;... Where churches neglect honest dialogue with contemporary culture, this leads to the ex-culturation of faith, and thus to the secularisation of society. (T Halik)

Obviously, the Church's mission is wider than the role assigned to ordained ministries. It derives from baptism, and is therefore the calling of all the baptised. For the same reason, all the baptised have a right to be involved in how the Church shapes itself for mission. Pope Benedict XVI emphasised this when he said the lay faithful are "co-responsible" with the ordained for "the Church's being and its activity" – i.e. for how it goes about carrying out its mission. And it is surely for this same reason that the Final Document on Synodality urges "the widest possible consultation" of the faithful in the decision-making processes of the Church.