

Homily, 4th Sunday after Pentecost, St Bartholomew's, 6 July 2025
(Day of Parish Consultation)

The church has two main purposes, given it by God: that of worship and that of mission. Worship comes first., just like the first commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Worship has priority over everything else. It's the centre of our life together and we worship the God who is revealed to us in Jesus: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Worship involves us in prayer (whether person or communal) and in liturgy: praise, thanksgiving, intercession.

But worship always flows into mission, into service, into evangelism, just as love of God flows into love of neighbour. Indeed, if our worship doesn't lead to mission, it's not authentic worship, just as love of God isn't authentic if it doesn't lead to love of neighbour.

Sometimes we can find the notion of 'mission' a little of off-putting. We may not feel comfortable with the way some Christians understand mission and evangelism in our church. It can sometimes feel very individualistic — as if it's only about me and Jesus, and about the salvation of souls from hell — and not concerned with justice at all or social and political structures or issues of inclusion.

But mission need not be like that — indeed it ought not to be. Mission in the first place is the mission of God, not our own mission, and we are called to participate in God's dream for the world. Mission is about God's will for justice and goodness and integrity; God's will for us to be in relationship with God and with one another and with the whole creation.

God has promised us in Jesus a new world order — a 'new creation', as Paul puts it in our reading today — where people of all kinds are included, where creation is loved and cared for, where we live together, as individuals, as nations, in peace and harmony.

It's also not just about souls but equally also about bodies. It's not just about individuals but also and equally about communities. It's not just about human beings but also and equally about creation itself. And our mission is to participate in God's mission, to share in God's love for the world.

II. Our readings today offer some perspectives on that mission that we're call to live out in the church, in this parish, in our own lives. In particular, our Gospel reading from St Luke call us to live an authentic life, ready to give and receive hospitality, openhearted, generous, self giving. Those 72 men and women disciples are sent out by Jesus in pairs to prepare for his mission, to go ahead of him.

And, like them, Jesus also calls us to authentic mission, mission that's accompanied by simplicity of heart and lifestyle, and openness to hospitality, including readiness for rejection when it comes, as it inevitably will. It's the mission of proclaiming in word and deed God's kingdom, a kingdom that heals wounds, that stands up against evil, that displays God's love in action.

In our Old Testament story, the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian by Elijah the prophet, we see mission in action in the way that little Israelite slave girl courageously bears witness to Elijah's powers to heal. We see it in Elijah himself and his extraordinarily bold prophetic ministry.

Among other things, our story warns us against treating the rich and powerful as if they are privileged in the kingdom of God. Elijah does not treat Naaman the way he expects to be treated: with extravagant courtesy and fawning reverence. He treats him like anybody else and summons him to humility, to embrace the gift of healing from God in a simple, ordinary way that would be no different from anybody else.

Naaman is at first outraged. Why should he be asked to wash in a muddy stream when the rivers of his own country are so much more beautiful? But his patient and more perceptive servants convince him to obey the prophet's words. He does so, he washes in the Jordan River, and he's healed of his skin disease (whatever it was). He has a hard lesson to learn but he learns it. The story then goes on to tell how Naaman is converted in his heart to the God of Israel, the God of Elijah and the little slave girl. God loves everyone, include Naaman, but has a special love for those who lack wealth and status and position, those who are poor and powerless.

III. A key question, as we consider a new Vicar for this parish, is to ask what mission means for us in this place where worship is so central. What is God calling us to? How can we show an inclusive love and service to the world around us, to the people who live in our neighbourhood? How can we draw them into a life lived in love and worship of God, and love of neighbour? Our new Vicar will be our leader in this calling but it's not his or her task alone. We're all called to share in the mission as well as the worship of God.

The comfort is that we don't do it alone. The Father sends us out. Jesus, our Saviour, walks ahead of us and we are called to follow him. The Holy Spirit works within and among us, strengthening us, inspiring us, comforting us as our companion and guide. May we respond with our heart's devotion to God's mission and may we work together to bring to birth the kingdom of God in this place.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy Lee