

A CHURCH BEING SENT JOHN 20:19-31

Mission Impossible, the television series: do you remember how each episode began and perhaps this happened in the movies too? Each one began with a tape: "Your mission should you choose to accept it...?" "This is what you have to do; you must go to recover the secret formula from the bad guys who have stolen it from our secret laboratory!" There was always a twist to the mission. Then "this tape will self-destruct in 5 seconds" and Tom Cruise is left to get on with the job. It was never impossible because the team always managed it no matter how many bad guys they had to meet along the way; they always did what they were sent to do. Mission is about sending, or being sent; that's what the word means! Whether Tom Cruise in the movies or Peter Graves in the television series or us in Church; mission is about being sent!

A key story for the Church's understanding of mission took place in the disciples' locked room after the resurrection. Jesus comes to stand in the midst of the room on the evening of the resurrection and says: "*Peace be...*" (*John 20:19*) Then He says, and this is important for us today: "*As the...*" (*v21f*) Jesus is sending His disciples on a mission; it is not clear yet what that mission will be and we will look at that next Sunday; what disciples were sent to do is explained elsewhere; here today it is enough for us to see that the disciples are sent by Jesus to continue His mission. We have already spoken about Jesus as being sent by the Father to complete God's mission to bless the world; now the disciples are being sent into the world in the same way that Jesus was.

So far, we have seen that mission is something that God does. We have said from the very start of this sermon series on mission that God has a mission that He is doing in the world. His mission is to bless the whole world, all nations, that people everywhere might enjoy the fruit of creation, might know God's peace, love etc. This has always been God's plan. At first, He put that plan into practice in and through Israel; then He sent Jesus to complete the plan and Jesus died and rose again to make God's blessing available to us. We said last week, that the gospel is for everyone, that all nations need to hear, that all sections of our society need to hear and we challenged ourselves with the question "What kind of Church do we need to be if the gospel is for everyone?"

Today, we come to the first sermon that directly addresses our part in the mission of God. So far, we have been talking about the mission that God is doing and that has been good and right and you can read these sermons on the website or in print, or listen again to the CD's from the library. Now we come to the first part we have to play in the mission of God. It comes from a story in John's gospel and these words of Jesus: "*As the...*" (*John 20:21*) So we are a people whom Jesus sends. The Church is sent by Jesus to do His will, to continue His mission in world. We may think in today's' climate that 'mission impossible' is not a bad title for that, because it does seem impossible; people seem uninterested in the Church and in the gospel because they are too busy doing other things, or are too preoccupied with all the other parts of life to think about the gospel and the Church. Jesus didn't just send His disciples on a mission; He also equipped them for that mission: "*receive...*" (*20:22*) and 50 days later, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples did receive the Spirit of God and the same Spirit lives in us to equip us to serve God in our world. We are not sent and then left, abandoned to sink or swim, but God goes with us; He is our help and strength. We are a Church being sent.

“As the...” (20:21) The way in which Jesus is sent by the Father must shape our understanding of what it means for us to be sent. The first part of Jesus being sent was to be ‘in the world’. Here’s an intriguing thought: “The fact that God was in the Nazarene neighbourhood for 30 years and no one noticed... a time to become part of the very fabric of the community and to engage in the humanity of it all.” (Alan Hirsch *The Forgotten Ways* page 133) Before Jesus did anything, He lived for 30 years as part of a village community; only after that did He set out on His ministry. These 30 years spent as part of the community allowed Him to experience life at first-hand, to get to know people, His fellow-villagers, what excited them, what saddened them, how they saw God, so that He was then able to help them later. He was sent to be in world for 30 years, not to *do* anything, just to *be* there, listening to people, learning about their lives, learning about human nature. He was sent to be in world.

One of the criticisms of the Church is that Christians are remote. There is a danger of so much Church activity that we live in a little Christian ghetto, our friends are all Christians, our families are Christian, at work we gravitate to other Christians if we find them. Or Churches are so busy that we leave very little time for Christians to get to know other people, or to be involved in other kinds of activities. There is “a time to become part of the very fabric of the community and to engage in the humanity of it all.” So often Churches have engaged in mission by sending out raiding parties from behind the walls; we have embarked on door-to-door visitation with a view to engaging people in conversation about God and the gospel and then at the end have withdrawn behind the barricades again till the time to send out the next raiding party. It has perhaps worked to an extent in the past, but perhaps the time is now for us to see a more effective way; that it is much better for us to be part of our communities and to be involved in the community and I know that many of you are.

Being in the world like this means that we begin to understand from the inside the kind of issues that other people face: we understand what excites people, or what disturbs them; we begin to understand what God means for them; we understand the rhythms of their life, how they spend their time, how they relax, where and how they meet. The key to all of this is the relationships that we create with people who are or will become our friends; these relationships become the basis for any deeper sense of mission that we might develop. Someone has said that “right where you are, God is moving to draw and connect people in the depth, risk and reality of knowing Christ.” As Christians are in world, involved in whole life of the community, relationships are formed with others and God is at work in ways that we sometimes don’t even see; that’s not possible if our life is spent behind barricades in the Christian ghetto and we only do Church things. Jesus sends us to be in the world.

Jesus met His disciples on evening of resurrection. *“Peace be...” (v19f)* Then He sent them. Jesus was sent to be in world, then secondly He was sent to serve the world. His service would mean that He would suffer and die, be crucified, then be raised; He shows them His scars and someone has suggested that the scars not only prove Jesus’ identity to the disciples, but also come as model for their mission. Jesus was sent to serve; the disciples are sent to serve. Jesus was sent to serve with humility and a sense of self-emptying; the disciples are sent to serve with humility and a sense of self-emptying. The cross is the centre of Jesus’ mission, He came to serve and give His life; our mission is shaped by the cross, sent not only to be in the world, but to serve the world and to serve other people and so reflect and show Jesus to world and to others by our humble service.

“I have...” (1 Cor 9:22) That phrase is sometimes dismissed as meaning a Church without principles; the Church that is all things to all men is sometimes said to stand for nothing, but is bending over backwards to accommodate itself to the world. That

is not what Paul meant! It means that he is prepared to understand what makes all kinds of people tick; it means that he is prepared to serve all kinds of people in appropriate ways so that he might show Christ to them. *"To the..." (9:22)* Paul took time to understand what made the Jews tick or what made people feel weak, to know their difficulties, to understand their sense of vulnerability; and out of that understanding he was then able to serve them in appropriate ways in order to bring the gospel to bear on their lives.

Who lives in our communities? There are families with young children – what excites them, what disturbs them, what does God mean for them? There are children of primary school age – what excites them, disturbs them, how do they see God? Teenagers, young adults, older adults, even older adults who are becoming more frail – for all of them we can ask the same questions – what excites them, what disturbs them, how do they see God? Then ask "how can we serve these people?" How can we as Church or as individuals serve young families, the children we know, teenagers, adults, older adults? How can we serve such people? It may be a church-based thing, but more often that not, it might be something else. Rick Warren, famous over the last few weeks for taking part in the inauguration of Barack Obama, founded a Church in Saddleback, San Francisco; they arrived at first in the middle of a new community of young families, young parents and when they asked people what they needed most and how the Church could help them, they discovered that what people needed most was help to understand what being a parent was all about; so they ran parenting classes in their community; serving others in name of Jesus – it's what we're sent to do!

Do you see yourself as sent? As sent by Jesus into the world? Sent to be in the world and then to serve your part of the world? That's what we are. As a Church we are sent into the communities in which we live, for which we are responsible, we call it our parish! As individuals we are sent by Jesus into our world, the world of families, work, neighbours, community groups, etc, sent to serve the world. It might seem a daunting task, mission impossible, right enough! But there are two things to finish with that help us along way:

1)I repeat what I said earlier: "right where you are, God is moving to draw and connect people in the depth, risk and reality of knowing Christ." God is at work through us when we are in the community, when we serve the community and who knows what the fruit of our labours will be, that we might save some?

2)God gives us His Spirit and the Spirit equips us, strengthens and helps us; Jesus sent His disciples, but not without help *"receive..." (v22)* The same Spirit lives in us, equips us, strengthens and helps us to be the people God wants us to be and to serve others.

"As the..." (20:21) Jesus was sent to be in the world and to serve the world; so He sends us to be in the world and to serve the world. Listen to the people you meet; what excites them about life? What disturbs them? How do they see God? Serve people humbly; let them see Jesus in us!