

THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS
ON EVANGELISM #1

Preaching the Church's Mission



Sermons Toward
Self-Understanding

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THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS ON EVANGELISM

#1 PREACHING THE CHURCH'S MISSION *Sermons Towards Self-Understanding*

#2 JUST THE BASICS *Teaching Christian Faith to Beginners*

#3 GIFTS AND GROWTH *How Discovering Spiritual Gifts Nurtures Evangelism*

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Seeing the Big Picture

INTRODUCTION

When I was a teenager, I often worked in my father's office. He was an architect, with a staff of about ten, and there were a number of useful jobs I could do. I straightened out their filing system, did a lot of photocopying, and helped on surveys of land that was going to be built on.

It wasn't exactly exciting work, but I understood what it was all about from my father. He often worked on his drawing board at home in the evenings. We lived in a dream house which he had designed for my mother. And, as a result, before I was ten I could draw quite respectable scale plans of imaginary buildings, complete with front and side elevations. So the filing and the copying and the holding of the measuring tape were all pretty insignificant by themselves, but, because of who my father was, I knew how they all contributed to the end-product of creating beautiful buildings. I had a vision of how the whole process fitted together, and I could do my part with some interest and enthusiasm.

One of my heroes for over 30 years has been John Stott. He became rector of All Souls, Langham Place, in the heart of London, England, in 1950; in 1975 he was made Rector Emeritus of the same church. A few years ago, he said, "If I were going to a new parish now, I would spend the first year preaching the doctrine of the church." The reason is simple. There are lots of jobs in the church, including many of those

done by clergy and parish councils and vestry meetings, jobs that are the equivalent of filing and copying and reading off a tape measure. And people in the pew don't always have the advantage of seeing the big picture and understanding how their job contributes to the architect's long-term plan. Some will think administering the sacraments is what the church is there for; others expect a high standard of pastoral care for members, especially the sick and shut-ins; yet others see the church as being there to fill up their spiritual gas-tank for the week ahead. And all of these are legitimate and important functions of the church.

Yet unless Christians have some sense of the big picture—what the church is, why they are there, what they are supposed to be doing, what the beautiful building is which they are trying to create—it is difficult to move forward with any vision or unity or purpose. Not least, it is only when we look at the big picture of the church that we have a clear sense of what evangelism is and where it fits into the church's life.

One of the ways we communicate the nature and purpose of the church is preaching.¹ Although liturgical churches normally follow the lectionary in their choice of sermon topics, there are times when a temporary departure from the lectionary can be beneficial. One reason might be just this: to concentrate for a time on preaching about the nature and calling of the church.

So if one were to put together a series of sermons on the church, what might it look like? What follows is one such possibility. There are fourteen themes here, in somewhat logical

sequence. For each one, I offer a theme, suitable scripture readings, suggestions for how this topic fits with the overall direction, and (sometimes) a possible approach.

You will quickly realize that there is far too much material under any given heading for a single sermon. In fact, just one of the readings I list could well form the basis for a single sermon. Thus you will probably want to pick and choose, perhaps only one sermon and one text for each topic, or, conversely, you may decide to expand the number of sermons. Your own local circumstances and your own personal interests will suggest which direction to take, as well as additional topics and texts.

In general, I have not presumed to offer illustrations or applications, or to suggest ways of handling the topic. Each preacher will want to draw on their own individual range of approaches, and make the topic their own. For interest's sake, I do offer a couple of my own sermons on these topics at the end. These are not intended as models but to stimulate your own ideas and approaches.

If you do not wish to preach a long series like this (though it has been done), there might be times in the year when you will preach (say) a series of three; or you may make it an occasional series, when the set readings coincide with one of the themes.

What in the World is God Doing?

TOPIC 1

This introduction traces a single idea—the image of God—through the Bible as one way to understand the church.

- ♦ Human beings made in the image of God—GENESIS 1:26-28
- ♦ Christ the image of God—COLOSSIANS 1:15
- ♦ The transforming of the Spirit—2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18 (*specially 18*)

In the story of creation, men and women are made in the image of God: they are like God in some significant ways. What these are is not spelled out, but we may suggest such things as creativity (the first characteristic of God described here), goodness, love, power, and community (since God is Trinity).

One of the effects of sin's entry into the world, however, is that that image is marred: not destroyed, since human beings still retain a Godlike beauty and dignity, but certainly less than perfect in every respect.

When Jesus comes, however, he is “the image of the invisible God,” a human being as human beings were meant to be in the beginning. One effect of being called to follow him is that by the Holy Spirit we are “changed into his likeness (image) from one degree of glory to another,” so that the Creator's handiwork is restored.

Thus to be a Christian and a member of the church is not to be weird or religious, but to be a person who is learning to live in God's world in God's way, following the leadership of Jesus.

SUGGESTION: This topic lends itself to a narrative approach. You may wish to make use of Tom Wright's image that the Bible is like a five act play: creation, sin, the Old Testament, the coming of Jesus, and the church.² Personally, I think it is helpful to add a sixth act—the eschaton—as Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh have suggested.³

The Church

Before the Church

TOPIC 2

We sometimes say that the church began on the Day of Pentecost. But, while there is some truth in this, in another sense, the community of God's people did not begin then. The New Testament encourages us to look back to the Old Testament for the origins of our faith.

- ♦ Abraham is called to bring God's blessing to the whole world (Galatians 3:8 even refers to this text as "the gospel beforehand")—GENESIS 12:1-3
- ♦ Israel is called to be an attractive model for the world—DEUTERONOMY 4:5-8
- ♦ All nations will seek to learn from Israel's God—MICAH 4:1-4
- ♦ Abraham as the model of faith, the church as the fulfilment of Genesis 12—ROMANS 4:13-25

An ancient Midrash on Genesis says, "I will make Adam first, and if he goes astray I will send Abraham to sort it all out."⁴ God calls into being a new nation, Israel, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, not for their own sake but in order that they might be channels of blessing to the whole world. God gives them instructions on how to live, and Moses points out that, if they are obedient, surrounding nations will be attracted to their way of life. Prophets like Micah foresee a day when this will be fulfilled.

The Christian church is caught up into this movement of God through history. Paul sees us as imitating the faith of

Abraham. Unless we happen to be Jewish by descent, we are among those non-Jewish nations whom Micah foresaw would be drawn to Abraham's God: the prophecy is coming true in us!

As we follow Jesus, and try to put his teaching into practice, we begin to learn how to live as the Creator intended, with love, dignity and joy.

SUGGESTION: Have congregation members (suitably prepared) read the words of the biblical characters (Abraham, Moses, Micah, Paul) at the appropriate point during the sermon. They could even dress in character.

The Mission of Jesus

TOPIC 3

Jesus comes to bring God's work of restoring the world to its climax.

- ♦ Jesus' announcement of the kingdom—MARK 1: 14-15
- ♦ Jesus' manifesto—LUKE 4:16-22
- ♦ The gathering of a kingdom community
 - calling of the disciples—MARK 1:16-20, MARK 3:13-19, JOHN 1:35-51
 - Jesus attracts “sinners” and goes to parties with them—MARK 2:13-17

Jesus preaches “the kingdom”—the realm where God rules unopposed and life is lived in God's way—and he invites men and women to join that kingdom. He calls twelve disciples, indicating that his work is continuous with the calling of historic Israel. Outsiders flock to join him because of his message of forgiveness, love and hope. His parties are a foretaste of the eschatological banquet of the King.

SUGGESTION: I have sometimes told the story of Matthew/Levi's banquet from the point of view of a friend of Matthew's, who hears his story and is intrigued to find out more about this Jesus. The friend begins with the experience of the party (why would a religious man have such friends?) and works backwards to the explanation (so the kingdom of God is like *this*).⁵

The Redemption of the World

TOPIC 4

The climax of God's redemptive work in the world is the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

- ♦ God's intention to redeem humankind—EPHESIANS 1:3-12
- ♦ Jesus' death and resurrection—ALL FOUR GOSPELS
- ♦ The significance of the cross—2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21
- ♦ Jesus' return to the Father—ACTS 2:33-36, EPHESIANS 4:7-13
- ♦ The sending of the Spirit—ACTS 2

God's desire is to redeem all humankind and the world which God created. To this end God sent Jesus to die for our sins, to rise again, ascend to heaven, and send the Spirit so that we might have faith. The church consists of those who have responded to God's invitation—the “first fruits” of God's redemption of the world.

SUGGESTION: In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul gives three images of the cross: (a) the image of resurrection and the exchange of life for death (verses 14-15), (b) the image of reconciliation and the exchange of alienation for friendship (verse 18), and (c) the image of sacrifice and the exchange of sin for righteousness (verse 21). The last of the three is perhaps the most difficult for contemporary people to grasp, but it makes more sense when set alongside the other two.

Entering the Community

TOPIC 5

How does one become a part of what Jesus is doing? The New Testament highlights two steps people must take in order to join the community of the King: repent and believe, or, sometimes, repent and be baptized.

- ♦ The message of repentance and faith—MARK 1:14-15
- ♦ Baptism—MATTHEW 28:18-20

In a sense, repentance and faith are parts of the same movement: a turning away and a turning towards: (1) repentance (turning away from all that is self-centered and evil) and (2) faith (turning to give our allegiance to Jesus). These two are an echo of Jesus' death and resurrection: we die to our old life and rise again into the new life. Both are symbolized in baptism. Thus we join the community of Jesus' followers, and join God's project of restoring the world.

SUGGESTION: Repentance and faith are both “religious” words, easily misunderstood outside the church (and often within the church for that matter). The ideas of turning away and turning towards, however, are very easy to illustrate dramatically: walking in one direction, then turning 180 degrees to begin walking the other way can be demonstrated without any dramatic props.

If faith is essentially trust, that too may be easily dramatized. We trust ourselves every day to buses, to news reports, to friends, to restaurants, to doctors, to weather forecasts, to the promises of others. Is our trust well-founded? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. What makes the difference? The trustworthiness of the source. Jesus is the most trustworthy source of all.

Maybe there is a way in which, during the sermon, you can test whether the congregation, or a volunteer from the congregation, really trusts you!

Images of the Community

TOPIC 6

A multitude of images speak of how this new community is to operate. (This is almost a sermon series in itself.)

- ♦ The Body of Christ—1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31
Each member of the community has a unique contribution to make to the work of Christ in the world. As we discover and exercise our gifts, we find joy and become more the person whom God made us to be.
- ♦ The Temple of God—1 PETER 2: 4-6
Peter sees the Christian community as the dwelling place of God, replacing the old Jerusalem temple. The members are as firmly connected to one another as the stones in a building.
- ♦ The Household of God—MARK 3:31-35, GALATIANS 6:10
The church is meant to be like a family with God as Father. (You may want to add something about female/mother images for God in the Bible.) We may not always like all other family members but we belong to one another and we must stick together.
- ♦ The Army of God—EPHESIANS 6:10-17
Although this is sometimes interpreted to mean we are individual soldiers in the conflict with evil, Paul probably has in mind Roman soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder with their shields in front of them, creating an impenetrable wall.

- ♦ The School of Jesus —MATTHEW 11:18-20
Jesus is frequently referred to as rabbi or teacher: here he invites his hearers to “Come ... learn from me.” His followers are his students, learning the way of God from him.
- ♦ The Flock—JOHN 10:1-18
We are God’s sheep, and Jesus is our shepherd. If we follow him, he will guide and feed us.
- ♦ A Loaf—1 CORINTHIANS 10:17
Paul implies that the church is like a loaf, closely knit together, but presumably (although he does not spell this out) broken for the life of the world, as Jesus was.

Though these are very disparate images, they cluster around two themes: (1) All speak of closeness, co-operation, mutual support, suffering together, and working together. One way the image of God is restored in us is by learning to live as a community reflecting the community of the Trinity. (2) Most of these images focus on following the leadership of Jesus: he is head, cornerstone, elder brother, commander, teacher, and shepherd.

SUGGESTION: Opening: how would a sociologist from Mars describe the church to folks back home? What images might he/she/it use? The New Testament gives us a range of pictures, all of them (presumably) based on observation, i.e. this is how the church actually operated. How do we measure up? Where are we strong? Where do we need to do some work?

Relationships in the Community

TOPIC 7

The life of the community is to model before the world how God wants people to live.

♦ Reconciliation—EPHESIANS 2:11-22

As we have been reconciled to God, so God expects us to work out that reconciliation in other relationships where there has been hurt, sin and alienation. Paul's specific example, ethnic differences, is one that applies to our world as much as to his.

♦ Accountability—MATTHEW 18:15-17

Are we our brothers' (and sisters') keepers? According to Jesus, the answer is yes. Christianity is not a private religion but one where we are responsible for encouraging and, when necessary, rebuking, one another. Jesus gives guidance for how this is to be done.

♦ Forgiveness—MATTHEW 18:21-35

Jesus is equally clear that members of his community must be forgiving of one another. Without forgiveness, we remain alienated from one another. Forgiveness is always costly, but in the cross God models how to pay the price of forgiveness.

♦ Generosity—ACTS 2:41-48, 4:32-37

In the early Christian community, not one of them was allowed to be in need. They cared for one another in very practical ways. (Of course, other images such as the body and the family also imply that there should be mutual care within the community.)

♦ Relationships—EPHESIANS 4:15-5:33

Every aspect of our lives, including marriage, family and work relationships, is to be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

SUGGESTION: The parables lend themselves to dramatic renderings. The one about the unforgiving servant in particular is not difficult to script—and can be quite funny without detracting from its sober conclusion.

Mutuality in the Community

TOPIC 8

Another way of approaching the question of life in the Christian community is a word study on the Greek word *allelous*, one another. Here are some of the key New Testament uses of the word:

- ♦ If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash *one another's* feet. JOHN 13:14
- ♦ I give you a new commandment, that you love *one another*. Just as I have loved you, you also should love *one another*. JOHN 13:34
- ♦ We who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are members *one of another*. ROMANS 12:5
- ♦ Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on *one another*, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. ROMANS 14:13
- ♦ Welcome *one another* ... just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ROMANS 15:7
- ♦ I myself feel confident about you ... that you yourselves are ... able to instruct *one another*. ROMANS 15:14
- ♦ Greet *one another* with a holy kiss. ROMANS 16:16
- ♦ Bear *one another's* burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. GALATIANS 6:2
- ♦ Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with *one another*, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. EPHESIANS 4:1-2
- ♦ Be kind to *one another*, tenderhearted, forgiving *one another*, as God in Christ has forgiven you. EPHESIANS 4:32

- ♦ Be subject to *one another* out of reverence for Christ. EPHESIANS 5:21
- ♦ Encourage *one another* and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. 1 THESSALONIANS 5:11
- ♦ Let us consider how to provoke *one another* to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. HEBREWS 10:24-25
- ♦ Confess your sins to *one another*, and pray for *one another*, so that you may be healed. JAMES 5:16
- ♦ Be hospitable to *one another*, without complaining. 1 PETER 4:9

One benefit of this study is the obvious stress on mutuality. The Christian life is not one of giving alone. Certainly I am called to serve my brothers and sisters, but they are called to serve me too. In principle, this means that no-one should get drained or burned out by the demands of the fellowship. This study is a healthy antidote to lone ranger faith or messianic pretensions.

SUGGESTION: You could start this sermon by inviting the congregation to volunteer church contexts in which they might use the phrase “one another.” While some might coincide with the biblical usages, others may not, e.g. criticize one another, avoid one another, be envious of one another, fear one another.

Leadership in the Church

TOPIC 9

The church is not anarchic, but neither is it authoritarian. In this, once again, it is to reflect the ultimate reality of the Trinity.

- ♦ Christ's model of servant leadership—JOHN 13:1-1-20
- ♦ Leaders equip the community to minister—EPHESIANS 4:7-16
- ♦ Leaders are "under-shepherds," following the example of Christ the good shepherd—1 PETER 5:1-6

The New Testament gives us different images of the Christian leader, all deriving from the example of Jesus. For example, Christian leaders are there to serve, not to promote their own glory. (Some may not know that the word minister actually means "servant.") Leaders do this by shepherding the flock into places of nurture and health. Part of their job is also to "equip" the people of God by their teaching, training, and encouragement, so that they may do the work of God in the world.

SUGGESTION: You may use this as an opportunity to teach about Bible translations. The King James Version of Ephesians 4:12 describes leadership as being "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." Leaders, in other words, are to do everything. A newer translation like the NRSV, however, more accurately

says that leaders are given "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up." Here the leadership is responsible for one thing only: preparing (or equipping) God's people; it is they (God's people) who then do the works of service which build up the Body of Christ.

The Church's Sacraments

TOPIC 10

a. Baptism

- ♦ The baptism of Jesus—MARK 1:9-11 *and parallels*
- ♦ Paul's theological reflection on baptism—ROMANS 6:1-11

There are many ways to think about baptism:

- ♦ It is the “outward and visible sign” of the “inward and spiritual grace” of identifying ourselves with Jesus and entering into the Christian community.
- ♦ It is the symbol of adoption into God's family.
- ♦ It is the way that we enroll in Jesus' school.
- ♦ It indicates our heart's desire to play our part in the story of God.
- ♦ It symbolizes the death of our previous way of life and our entry into the new life of God's people.
- ♦ It is the public declaration that we wish to live by God's grace under the leadership of Jesus as we are enabled by the Holy Spirit.

b. Eucharist

- ♦ The institution of the Passover—EXODUS 12:1-13
- ♦ Jesus' institution of the Last Supper—MATTHEW 26:17-30 *and parallels*
- ♦ We can worship only if our relationships are right—MATTHEW :23-24
- ♦ Paul's pastoral reflections on the last supper—1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-34

The richness of this service is indicated by the many ways in which Christians have spoken of it: holy communion, eucharist, the Lord's supper, the Lord's table, the breaking of bread, the mass. By the same token, there are many ways to preach about it:

- ♦ It is a renewal of our relationship with Christ, reminding us that we are totally dependent on him and that he lives within us.
- ♦ It is thus sustenance for our spiritual journey—a meal at the wayside.
- ♦ It is a tangible and personal reminder that he died because of our sin. MATTHEW 26:28
- ♦ It is a meal with the Lord at his family table.
- ♦ It encourages us that we will feast with him at the last day in his kingdom. MATTHEW 26:29
- ♦ Eucharist thus points us to the past and to the future.
- ♦ We should prepare ourselves spiritually for this service. 1 CORINTHIANS 11:28
- ♦ In particular, we should examine our relationships and seek reconciliation where necessary before we come to communion: vertical and horizontal relationships are intertwined. MATTHEW 5:23-24

SUGGESTION: To preach on these topics in the context of an actual baptismal service or an actual Eucharist would make the handling of this topic particularly meaningful.

The Church's Beliefs

TOPIC 11

Why does it matter what we believe?

- ♦ Paul's Gospel derived from the teaching of the first apostles—
1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11
- ♦ The Gospel is God's gift, to be guarded carefully—
GALATIANS 1:6-12
- ♦ Pressures to give up on the message—ACTS 20:25-35

One approach to this is to say that God has entrusted the Gospel to the church: it is a unique *recipe* for the healing of the world, and we dare not dilute or contaminate it. Another approach says that if we forget our *story*, we lose our identity. Creeds are summaries in point form of our story and thus reminders of who we are. The Gospel is like a *work of art*: we treasure it but do not alter, add to or subtract from it.

Such an attitude to belief does not mean being narrow-minded or bigoted. Nor does it mean we are not allowed to have doubts. Yet the clearer we are about what we believe and who we are, the more we can extend freedom and courtesy to the beliefs of others, and enter into productive dialogue with them. We need to seek a "generous orthodoxy" which is firm at the centre yet open at the edges.

SUGGESTION: When the sermon is followed by the creed, as happens in the Anglican Eucharist, you can end the sermon by talking about the significance of the creed and what it means to say it as a community.

The Church in the World

TOPIC 12

One reason the church exists is to serve the world by word and deed. Jesus models this servanthood. We are to live out the values of the kingdom in a world that does not yet acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The leadership of the community equips the members to live this life of mission in the world.

- ♦ Called to be salt and light—MATTHEW 5:13-16

Jesus' images of salt and light are simple, powerful and cross-cultural. In this context:

- ♦ Salt and light also speak of the influence the church is to exert on the world, both negative (to preserve from decay) and positive (to bring light and life).
- ♦ They have to maintain their distinctiveness in order to fulfil their function: salt must be salty, light must be visible. The church cannot become like the world (on the one hand) nor hide from the world (on the other).
- ♦ Helmut Thielicke adds, "Salt and light have one thing in common: they give and expend themselves—and thus are the opposite of any and every kind of self-centered religiosity." Our ministry in the world, like that of Jesus, is one of self-giving love.

SUGGESTION: This might be an occasion to invite a lay person to tell, either before or during the sermon, something of what it means to him or her to live out their faith in the "secular" world.⁶

The Church's Growth

TOPIC 13

Part of the church's work is to reach out with the good news of Christ and to invite others to become part of what God is doing in the world—in other words, evangelism.

- ♦ Jesus' example of an evangelism that is winsome, respectful and intriguing—*JOHN 4:1-42*
- ♦ Part of our Christian responsibility is to “make disciples,” that is, encourage others to become learners from Jesus too—*MATTHEW 28:18-20*
- ♦ People are drawn to faith by preaching and the authentic lifestyle of the Christian community—*ACTS 2:37-47*
- ♦ If we are being faithful, people will be drawn to the community, and ask us questions about our faith. Our job is to be ready with answers—*COLOSSIANS 4:5-6, 1 PETER 3:15-16*

Evangelism puts fear into the heart of many Christians but it need not do so. Evangelism is essentially inviting others to join the story of God. Jesus is our model of how to do evangelism in a way that is respectful but clear and inviting. Evangelism always involves words (there is no New Testament reference which suggests otherwise) but the words only have credibility against the backdrop of a lively, committed Christian community, as is clear in the Book of Acts.

SUGGESTION: This sermon might be introduced with the contrast between popular (or unpopular) images of evangelism

and the example of Jesus. After all, in a sense he “invented” evangelism, but nobody ever accused him of “ramming the Bible down anyone’s throat” or of being manipulative or looking for financial gain. Indeed, “the common people heard him gladly.” I once began a sermon on evangelism by coming slowly from the back of the church down the centre aisle, wearing sandwich boards which read, “Repent, the end of the world is at hand,” muttering incoherently about judgement, and distributing tracts to left and right.

The Destiny of the Church

TOPIC 14

God's desire is to perfect us, that is, to make us like Christ, and to restore the whole world at the end of time.

- ♦ The church is to become a bride worthy of Jesus—EPHESIANS 5:25-27
- ♦ The redemption of the church foreshadows the renewal of the whole creation—ROMANS 8:18-23
- ♦ Our ultimate calling is to glorify God and enjoy God for ever—REVELATION 21:1-27

The church is not static. It has an ultimate destination! The end of the story links with the beginning of the story. The story began with a focus on perfect people living in a perfect world. Now the world and its inhabitants are restored to perfection, though it is not the same perfection as at the beginning: the story began in a garden, but now it ends in a city. Sometimes we talk of heaven as if it were a vague, ethereal place where everybody is very serious and (frankly) boring. But the image of the city is one which suggests community and activity and culture. This is underlined by the fact that the nations will contribute their glory to the culture of this new Jerusalem. (Revelation 21:24, 26)

SUGGESTION: C.S. Lewis' description of the next world in *The Last Battle*, the final volume in the Narnia story, is one of

the best I know (though personally I think he stresses the discontinuity between this world and the next more than the continuity). I have often read this when talking about the “consummation of all things” as a way of making the subject real and appealing.

A SAMPLE SERMON:

How Jesus Links the Old Testament with the Church

(TOPIC 2)

I am probably the only person in this church who has ever deliberately torn a page out of the Bible. This is the Bible, and there is where the page was. I did it almost 30 years ago now, at the instigation of an Anglican clergyman, actually my Old Testament professor when I was at seminary. (Ah, the things they teach in seminaries.) What he actually said was,

“Printers may be very good printers, but they are not necessarily good theologians. And when they put a blank white page between the Old and the New Testaments, they are actually being very bad theologians! The Old and New Testaments are not different stories, but actually parts of the same story.”

So, many of us, being conscientious students, removed the offending page in the interests of good theology—which gave us a funny feeling of being very naughty and very self-righteous at the same time. (I recommend it.)

It was a vivid reminder that when Jesus came, he didn't come into a vacuum. He came into a Jewish world, shaped by the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), and his understanding of God and of the world and of his own role came straight out of that book. In fact, although many people have problems with the Old Testament, we won't understand Jesus without some sense of what the Old Testament is about.

One way to come at this is through the family trees, the genealogies, of Jesus. There are two in the New Testament, one in Matthew, one in Luke. They are long, and to western ears they are boring—a begat b, b begat c, c begat d, as if that was the only thing they ever did, all with long unpronounceable names—and you don't hear them read in church that often (you may be grateful I decided not to make them the Gospel reading this morning). On top of that, the two genealogies are quite different from one another, and much ink has been spilled trying to figure out how historical Matthew and Luke meant them to be and how the two relate to one another. But for the first readers of these Gospels, the message of the genealogies was startlingly clear—and also very controversial.

Let's think about Matthew first. Matthew's Gospel was written for Jewish people who were curious about this new faith. So, in Matthew's genealogy, Jesus' ancestors are traced back through Jewish history. King David is listed as one of Jesus' ancestors (once in royal David's city and all that)—implying that Jesus too is a king. Matthew mentions the time when the people of Judah went into captivity to Babylon—hinting perhaps that Jesus comes to lead people out of an even greater captivity. And Matthew goes all the way back to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, and stops there.

Well, what would this say to those early readers? Matthew is not just telling us that Jesus has a great Jewish pedigree, though that might impress them. There's more to it than that. He ends with Abraham. God's call to Abraham was to become the father of a great nation. Why was he called? God planned that

his descendants would be a blessing to the whole world. And what was that blessing? The blessing was the unique experience of God which the Jewish people had received. And part of that was the way of life which God described for them through the law of Moses. Those commandments were not meant to be a great burden. Rather, they were meant to describe the way people work best—the maker’s handbook for human beings, if you like. Moses actually promised:

“If you obey these commandments ... you will live!” DEUT. 30:16

It was rather like saying, If you follow the instructions for your computer, it will actually work right.

And God’s hope was that as the people learned to relate to him and to one another—to love God and love their neighbour—the world around would see in them what it meant to live as God’s people in God’s world in God’s way, in the intimate friendship of God.

And what Matthew is wanting us to see is that in this person of Jesus, that ideal is finally beginning to come about. He was the embodiment of everything that the children of Israel were meant to be.

The Pharisees had tried to take Abraham’s descendants in a wrong direction—turning God’s law into bondage, trying to shut the world out and keep God’s blessing to themselves. Now Jesus is trying to get things back on track. He’s saying, “No, this is not what it’s about: God’s law and God’s love are for the whole world, and we need to show them that.” And in the person of this one man, Jesus, we see precisely what the

descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel, were meant to be: God’s people, living in God’s world in God’s way, and in the friendship of God.

What can Luke’s Gospel add to such an amazing picture? Unlike Matthew, Luke’s Gospel is written primarily for non-Jews, for Gentiles. (Luke is actually the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible.) And his family tree of Jesus is making a different point. His story does go back through the Old Testament to Abraham, the same as Matthew’s, but it doesn’t stop there. It goes beyond Abraham, all the way to Adam.

What’s the point this time? You don’t have to believe in a literal Adam and Eve to get the point. Luke is saying, yes, Jesus was a Jewish messiah, yes, he was shaped by the Jewish Scriptures, and yes, his message was primarily for the followers of Moses. Nevertheless, the message he brought was not just for Jewish ears: it was for the whole world, for every son of Adam and daughter of Eve, as C.S. Lewis describes us.

Before any major building is put up—the CN Tower or the SkyDome—working models are made, small-scale representations of the real thing, so that the engineers can see exactly how they will work, and iron out the details before they spend billions of dollars putting up the real thing.

The family of Abraham was meant to be like that: a model of how the human race was ideally meant to function: they were to be a pilot plant, a small-scale model, for the whole world to copy. The problem with the Pharisees was that they thought their relationship with God was an end in itself, just for them to enjoy. But Luke is saying no: the life of intimacy

with God, the life of living as God's people in God's world in God's way, is not just for one little nation—it's open to everyone.

This puts many of Jesus' sayings in a different light. Today's Gospel (John 10:11-18), for example, we often take as a pretty Sunday School picture of a shepherd and a lamb with a hurt leg. But it is actually an inflammatory political statement calculated to get Jesus in big trouble with the authorities.

So when we look at the picture of the good shepherd, what's going on? Jesus' listeners would have recalled that the prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament had criticized the leaders of his day for misleading God's people. They were, he said, behaving like bad shepherds. Then he says this:

“Thus says the LORD God, I myself will search for my sheep ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep ... I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured.” [He also says:] “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them.”

Who is Jesus claiming to be by saying, “I am the good shepherd”? At the very least, he is saying he is a new King David, the shepherd king; at the most radical, he is claiming to be God himself, come to look for God's people.

Then when Jesus said in that same reading, “I have come that they might have life in all its fullness,” it's not left to our imagination to figure out what that life is—it's not “the good life” as we might think of it in our culture. It's life as God promised it in the Old Testament: the quality of life that God

wanted to give to the world through Israel, the real life of living as God's people in God's world in God's way, in the intimate friendship of God.

And when he said, “I have other sheep who are not of this fold,” he was preaching the very unpopular message that the blessing of Abraham was intended for the blessing of the whole world. He was challenging the whole social structure of his day—their politics, their religion, their values, their identity. No wonder they crucified him!

What emerges here is a sort of hourglass shape: God begins by creating the whole human race. When we turn away from God, he starts over with one small nation. As they fail to fulfil their calling, the focus comes down to one solitary human being, like the apex of the hourglass, and he fulfils God's calling by his life and death and resurrection. And then, from him, the whole thing begins to broaden out again: first the twelve (a significant number), then the message going to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and eventually to the uttermost ends of the earth—which includes all of us here today.

What then is the church? We are among the millions around the world who are seeking to follow the call of this Jesus—descendant of Abraham, descendant of Adam, king of David's line, the divine Good Shepherd—because we believe that only he can teach us, day by day, what it means to live life in all its fullness—living as God's people in God's world in God's way, in the intimate friendship of God.

You know, I'm not sorry I cut that page out of my Bible.

(This sermon took approximately 17 minutes.)

A SAMPLE SERMON:

Jesus as the Model for the Church's Mission:

What on Earth is the Church? (TOPIC 3)⁷

Let's face it. The church of Jesus Christ is in a mess. Thousands of members die or leave every year, and are not replaced. Scandal after scandal seems to hit the headlines. And, as if that were not bad enough, we are saddled with expensive old buildings and squabble about denominational politics. We are like the proverbial frog in the kettle. If the frog were dropped suddenly into hot water, it would be alarmed and jump. But because the water is heating slowly, it doesn't notice. And the result will be, simply, death.

It's time to ask, who are we? why are we here? what is really important in our life as the church? what does it mean these days that we call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ? what exactly is our mission?

Strangely enough, the word mission is not in the Bible! But the word "mission" is from the Latin meaning "to send" and that is certainly used in the Bible. And it turns out to be used most often in a place I would never have expected. The writer most taken up with the thought of the church's mission is John: he uses the word "send" no less than sixty times in twenty-one chapters. So let's see how John can help us figure out our mission.

The first thing I notice is that John talks a lot about the idea that God the Father sent Jesus. In fact, forty out of those sixty

references to sending are exactly that: "the Father sent the Son." Here's a sample: "whoever does not honour Son does not honour *the Father who sent him*; whoever believes *him who sent me* has eternal life; I seek not to please myself but *him who sent me*. (5:23-24) For John, Jesus is the great missionary, in the deepest, fullest sense of that word. But then I want to ask:

1. *OK, Jesus, what exactly is this mission that you're sent on?*

I suppose many of us might answer, Well, Jesus came to show us how to live, or, Jesus came to die for our sins. And those things are true. But what Jesus actually says is, "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." (6:38) Jesus says his reason for coming was to do what his Father wanted, constantly, consistently and in detail.

So I find my next question is:

2. *Well, Jesus, what exactly is this will of God that you find so consuming?*

One answer is that it is God's will that Jesus should give life to the world. The way Jesus puts it is this: "I came that people might have life, and have it abundantly." (10:10) That sounds wonderful, but let's ask, Jesus, how do you do that?

First, it has to do with the things Jesus says. What he tells us is, "The Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak." (12:49-50) So a crucial part of the task given to Jesus by his Father is sim-

ply to talk, to pass on the words which he has heard from his Father, words of forgiveness and challenge and direction. That's evangelism! And when people hear those words and accept them, they find that indeed they begin to experience the new life Jesus came to bring. As Peter exclaims, "You have the words of eternal life!"

But there is something else that is the will of God, and it's just as important. It's clear, for example, in chapter 9, when Jesus is about to heal the blind man. He says, "we must do the work of him who sent me." (9:4) Jesus' mission isn't just a mission of words but a mission of works. He speaks from the Father, yes, but he also knows that certain acts are close to the Father's heart. What kind of things would those be? Well, it's clear from the context: when he heals the paralyzed or gives sight to the blind, that is exactly the sort of thing he has seen his Father doing.

And of course, these two things are connected. Jesus *says* God is love, and he *lives* the love of God. He cares for people in *practical ways*, and *tells them in words* that God cares for them. The two are mirror images of one another: the words of life and the works of life. If you like, Jesus' mission is one of show and tell.

So let's ask:

3. Jesus, what happens when you do the will of God like this?

In answer, Jesus says a most remarkable thing: "Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me." (12:45) In other words, when

Jesus does and says what God wants, what people around actually see and hear is God himself. Jesus is a window into God at work. A human being, fully alive, fully human, but without sin, looks like God.

But then there is one more thing. It's crucial, and it's this. Towards the end of John's Gospel, in the Upper Room, just as Jesus is about to leave the disciples, he makes a simple but devastating statement, one which means the disciples will never be the same again. It's this: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." (20:21)

Do you see why this is so devastating, so life-changing? As Jesus was sent, the disciples are sent. Jesus was sent to do the Father's will: now he sends the disciples for exactly the same reason—to do the Father's will.

And what was the Father's will? To bring life to the world: now that's our job too. How did he do that? By speaking the words of life and doing the works of life. Well, that's what he wants us to do.

And when he did those things, what happened? People saw the reality of God in him: when we do those things, people will see God in us too.

It takes your breath away, doesn't it? We would never have the audacity to make such claims for ourselves, neither would we dare to take on that kind of responsibility. But it's right there on the lips of Jesus, and if we consider ourselves his disciples, we need to take it very seriously. Jesus was a window into God at work; now, apparently, God wants to fill his world with a million windows: us.

Conclusion

“As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” This is radical stuff, far more important than replacing the church carpet or denominational in-fighting. It has far-reaching consequences. When we take this seriously, it may mean that God calls us to Bible translation in Papua New Guinea. Well, that’s great. That’s an important part of Jesus’ mission in our world.

But Jesus may also call us to resign from some of those church committees we got talked into joining, and to get involved with our neighbourhood council instead. That may turn out to be our mission, the place we speak the words of God and do the works of God, and help people find new life.

Or maybe Jesus will simply encourage us in the things we’re doing already, but to begin to see those as a mission field and to see ourselves as missionaries—sent ones—there, representing his concerns, his heart, his mind.

The important thing is to be open to hear his voice, disturbing and unsettling though it may be, and to follow Jesus as Jesus followed the Father—so that others may see Jesus in us, and be drawn to him. That’s the heart of what church is about.

(This sermon took approximately 13 minutes.)

Notes

1. It would not be difficult to adapt this series as material for a Bible study group.
2. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140-141.
3. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 182, 240.
4. Wright, 251.
5. I tell this story in my book *Evangelism for ‘Normal’ People* (Augsburg Fortress 2002), 49-51.
6. This paragraph is based on John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon in the Mount* (Leicester UK: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 57-68.
7. This is a summary of chapter 4 of *Evangelism for ‘Normal’ People*.