**Acts 2:42-47: Motivation, means, manifestation of mission**

I was recently part of a conversation in which we discussed mission trends and the realities of the church in our world today. The original, *from the West to the rest* idea has now given way to *mission from everywhere to everywhere*. Mission has now become a messy and complex task, which although still involves sharing with people who know nothing about the gospel, these days more often requires us to work with people who have heard something of the gospel and may have misunderstandings or even past history with the church.

The last section of Acts 2 is one of my favourite parts of the scripture and I have long thought about it as a mission passage. So, I want to look at it today from three interrelated angles: the motivation for, means of, and manifestation of mission.

As we know, this short section describes the very beginning of the Church, after the public address by Peter and the repentance of a couple of thousand people in Jerusalem. Peter used the occasion of Pentecost, and was empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach an evangelistic message, commending Christ to his Jewish listeners on the basis of their shared Jewish faith.

After the large scale repentance, people came together and formed what the NIV describes as the ‘fellowship of the believers’. We don’t know how many of the 3000 became part of this fellowship, or whether there were several fellowships. We don’t know whether what is presented in vv.42-47 describes the lives of all of the new Christians or just some. It doesn’t really matter. The main thing is that we have a description of how Christ followers lived their lives as a fellowship and. In addition, we learn how they were changed and what that means of that change was. For me, we can draw on these verses to think about why we do mission, how we do it, and what the results are.

Let’s think a little bit about the motivation for mission. Why should we get involved? Why is it important? What can this passage tell us about the spiritual, theological, and experiential forces which might take us into mission? And when I say mission, it doesn’t matter whether we are crossing cultures or staying with what is familiar to us. It doesn’t matter whether you are staying in Stowe or going to Stavropol, carrying out missions in Buckingham or Burkina Faso.

V.42 mentions devotion to *teaching, fellowship, eating together, and prayer*. It is unlikely that breaking of bread involved Holy Communion at this very early point in Christian history, but we can certainly include it today.

Luke’s point is that when we devote ourselves to these four things it is very hard to be a passive Christian. If this group was devoted to the teaching of the Apostles, then the transformational preaching of Christ’s disciples was supremely important for them. At the time, there was no written New Testament, and so the teaching of the Apostles would most likely have been eyewitness accounts of what Jesus had done and explanations of Old Testament passages in the light of Christ’s life and work. This is what Peter did earlier in Acts 2. If we moved Acts 2 to today, we would be thinking of solid Bible teaching which explores and applies what Jesus has done. It’s an incredibly powerful story, an account of the Jesus movement and the record of the radical intervention in human history that Jesus represents. For those first believers or us 2000 years later, truly understanding how Christ both fulfilled and went beyond the teaching of the Old Testament should galvanise us into action.

Let’s think next about fellowship. Here was new belonging, a new community, people fresh and almost giddy with a sense of newness and excitement as they realised what had happened among them and how it made sense against the background of their own history and world view. A group of people with a new allegiance to God, a powerful sense of forgiveness and redemption, and a new, open, and egalitarian way of looking at each other would be gripped by a passion to tell other people about their fellowship and draw them in.

Strongly related to their new community was their commitment to eating together. All human societies are stratified and divided. We live in a world of ‘self and other’, ‘your tribe and my tribe’, ‘us and them’. Eating with someone, possibly quite different from our own group or family, means acceptance and tolerance. So here is a community which prefigures the ideas of Gal 3:28, where human identity markers of race, gender, and class are just not important in the light of the supreme identity marker which is our allegiance to Christ. It’s a principle of what Donald Kraybill called the ‘upside down kingdom’. While this may be strongly motivational for some, it might be scary for those who don’t want to be taken out of our comfort zone. People say that you can choose your friends but not your family, but Pentecost and its ongoing vibrations bring us into an instant family, warts and all. But we also know, deep in our being, that accepting and relating to people different from ourselves is right in the eyes of God and part of belonging to his kingdom. I am reminded of the idea of the ‘stone made smooth’ which came from the famous Chinese pastor Wang Mingdao. He said that spending time with other believers and really engaging with them meant that over the years the sharp edges of his character were knocked off and he eventually became a nice round pebble like you find on the beach.

And finally, prayer. We don’t need to be convinced that prayer is motivational for mission. But let me be difficult. What kind of prayer do we hear about in our churches and groups? How much prayer is inward or rather ‘me-focused’? Prayer which is informed by the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, and being together, should be both inward and outward focused. By all means pray for *our* fellowship, *our* spiritual community, but don’t stop there. The very freshness of the apostles’ teaching in the new fellowship, the expansive nature of their new life together, was like a balloon being inflated, pushing outwards, and causing the new believers to pray for people outside their group.

So, first verse alone is highly motivational for mission, pushing us from behind, from within, to go out and get involved in all kinds of mission.

These verses also tell us about the means of mission. How do we go about it? What do we do? Just before this short passage, Peter went out and proclaimed a forceful gospel message. Proclamation is important, and Peter did it very well, yet note how he structured his message carefully to connect with his listeners. He presented Jesus in a very Jewish way, probably quite differently from how the gospel was presented to many of us. How we should go about proclamation in the different cultures and groups with which we interact is a *very* interesting question, and mercifully not part of this sermon.

Proclamation has been powerful in the history of mission. However, not many of us get to stand and talk to 3000 people. Either people would not listen, or not take you seriously, or maybe call the police. For some of us, so-called ‘proclamation’ may be a simple, quiet opportunity to share our faith, as we tell someone what we believe about Jesus, God and human beings and the relationship between them. But we live in a world where many people know something about the God of the Bible and his church. And let’s be honest, in many Western countries, and large parts of East Asia, Latin America and Africa, people may have fixed views and even prejudices about Christianity and its adherents.

Sometimes, our task is not so much about getting people to believe 15 weird things about God and human beings before breakfast, as to deconstruct and remove negative impressions or suspicions about the church. And to be sure, while we might think that ‘church’ means vicars, bishops, missionaries, and so on, it also means *us*. People see *us* as the church. Ever cut in front of someone on the road or taken someone else’s parking place, with a ‘Jesus’ or ‘fish’ sticker on the back of your car? Ouch. More seriously, the church and missionaries have made mistakes in their proclamation and activities. We can’t deny some of the darkness of the church’s past and present.

Many people around the world who have had some exposure to Christian teaching or Christianity or church or even *Churchianity* may need more than the ‘facts and statements’ approach to evangelism that many of us feel comfortable with. Some of us will be familiar with apologetics, which arms us to defend the reliability of the Bible, the resurrection of Christ, or the strange idea that God is a Trinity. There’s nothing wrong with any of that. But we live in suspicious times, don’t we? These days, people may no longer believe the smooth presentation or the convincing argument, and often the question behind the question is: *Can you show me that this stuff really works in your life*?

This is where Acts 2 is so powerful. *Powerful* doesn’t mean *easy*, and there are Christian people who would rather proclaim than do all of the demanding things in these verses. Why? Because it is relatively easy to present and defend facts, and a lot harder to live out our faith consistently in the real world. So, following Peter’s earlier proclamation, these verses describe a *missional* lifestyle.

Here we see one means of mission. Sharing faith is closely connected with sharing communal life. Imagine you talk to someone about Christ and they get the basic idea, and now they come to your church or your home group. They see groups of Christians devoted to scriptures which explain who Jesus is and why he makes a difference. Bear in mind that although for many Christians, the scripture is a treasure trove of *doctrine*, in both testaments there is a lot of *experience* which applies to real-life situations. This is the genius of the Bible.

How do we relate to our family members and friends? What’s our attitude at work? How do we live as good citizens? What kind of character does God want to create in us? How does he want to refine our attitudes and behaviour? What are the marks of spiritual greatness? This is all about getting our hands dirty, getting our *faith* dirty, if you like, not only in church, but out there in the real world. Imagine that our non-believing friend or family member sees our fellowship life in action, an atmosphere of being and doing which is different from anything they’ve ever seen. Imagine that people on the edge of our community see how we accept each other and eat together and how we pray for each other and the world around us. Real faith in action is mission.

The result might look like v.43 and v.47. There doesn’t necessarily have to be signs and wonders in a charismatic sense - that’s a different sermon too – but there was wonderful stuff happening. These verses show us that people outside liked what they saw: power and love. This new lifestyle caused them to enjoy the favour of all the people, as in v.47. This Holy Spirit infused, Bible-influenced, communal life was intensely attractive, and the second half of v.47 tells us that people were joining the community because they liked what God was doing.

And there’s a practical bit in the middle which is rather disturbing. This passage is not asking us to become Christian Communists, abandoning common sense, and taking great risks with our possessions in a community of people we may not know very well. It was a different time and a different culture, and our whole financial system is totally different. Yet, at its heart this section is, and should be, challenging to us. As they lived out their faith, through their devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, people were moved to share what they had, for the benefit of the group. People’s needs were met, and the richer helped the poorer. A very important element of mission should be bearing witness to the transforming power of Christ by being a community where those with power, money, or agency act on behalf of the weaker members. It is also very Old Testament.

It is not for me to say how this should be done today, as this is a matter between individual Christians and God and between Christian communities and God. In a civilisation and financial system a world away from 1st century colonial Jerusalem, people need to interpret this and work it out for themselves. But the principle is here and those with money and influence need to get together with each other and with God and ask what this means. In an increasingly unfair world, with economic dislocations, climate change, and pandemics, some of the people in our churches are hurting, and it’s not their fault. And what a powerful testimony of transformed lives and relationships it would be if those outside saw that being in Christ together made a difference in a very practical way.

A related aspect is the incredible sense of gladness and sincerity in v.46. Sharing and caring demonstrate something very attractive and missional. As they studied the apostles’ teaching and got involved in fellowship life, their lives were marked by a combination of joy and seriousness. Because they were so sincere about the new life in God and what it meant, and because they were so earnest about being transformed, they were joyful. I like this. There’s something really nice about joy and sincerity coming together. It’s not just happy-happy, but is a joy that comes from being plugged into God and his people and feeling that good stuff is happening to you and through you.

So I have talked about the motivation and the means, and it probably won’t surprise you if I say that the manifestation is pretty much what you find in the motivation and the means. What does it look like when mission is being done successfully, when it’s working?

The manifestation of ongoing, successful mission is something like these verses. If we’re doing it right, this is what we will see. There will be groups of people for whom it’s really important to come together and grapple with God’s Word. It won’t be easy, and there could be misunderstandings and disagreements in the group, but the emerging new group of believers will be devoted to the scripture. Successful mission has got to result in heavy-duty disciples who know their stuff, not just converts. That’s what Matt 28 is really about. The *devoted* of v.42 is a strong word. The same commitment word applies to their fellowship life. If mission being done properly and successfully, then this group of people who are so committed to the Scripture are also devoted to the church. It is as much about what they put *into* church as what they get *out* of it. Coming to church, being involved in a home group, meeting other believers informally; these are all central to their lives. And they share food and they pray together. And as we have seen already, these people face outwards as well as inwards and wherever they go, they make a difference. At the end of the passage, we see that people outside know and approve of this new spiritual organism. People can argue over doctrine and beliefs, but can you dispute lives of joy and sincerity? You know what it’s like. People are sometimes suspicious of the church and may harbour prejudices against it, yet like the Pharisees, they will not be able to deny what they have seen.

A couple of broader thoughts on this. Sometimes when you preach in this way on this kind of passage, after the sermon, over coffee, you meet the ‘yes but’ people. Great sermon, Paul, cheers. But what you’re saying is really over the top and not practical. Have you been to our church? Do you know the issues at our home group? I really don’t have the kind of time to be devoted in the way that you are talking about. I don’t like you loading all this guilt on me.

I suppose my answer is, how important is this stuff to you really? The passage is not asking you to throw in your job and go and preach the gospel to some snake infested tribe in the middle of nowhere. This passage is just a testament to what happened after Peter preached the gospel. The natural and spiritual effect of his preaching was the creation of this new community, for whom *everything* was *different* in the light of Christ. I suppose the issue is how *different* is different, or how much does *everything* actually cover? Talk about it with God and see what he says. But remember that a lot of research into the early church shows that a combination of proclamation and demonstration made the gospel spread like wildfire out of the Middle East and westward into Europe and eastward towards Central Asia. Most of those who carried the gospel were just ordinary *agape* people with Acts 2:42-47 inside their hearts.

The beauty of this passage is its strong broad principles and exhortation to be part of something exciting and transformational. It lays out what God has done in the past and continues to do and makes it seem so attractive that I hope everybody wants to be involved in one way or another. But the details of what you do and how much you do are between you and God.

So, in six short verses we have some basic ideas on why we should get involved in mission, how we might go about it, and what it might look like if we are doing it right. It’s about cleaving to God and his teaching and to each other. It’s about living life differently and witnessing to a complex and suspicious world. It’s about putting your money where your mouth is. Walking the talk. Whatever neat phrase you like. We live in a world of suspicion and unease where people no longer trust fake news and snake oil salesmen. This passage is about showing people that all this stuff is real and the more of us get involved the better. Let’s finish with v.47: *the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*