

## The Mission of the Church by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **Matthew 9:35-10:8** (Lectionary Year A, Proper6)

**Introduction:** Do you know which companies have the following mission statements?

*To inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.* <sup>1</sup>

*"Our vision is to be earth's most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online."* <sup>2</sup>

*Our mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.* <sup>3</sup>

Today's subject is The Mission of the Church. Mission statements are a modern part of corporate culture, but I wonder if we were to craft a statement today to sum up the Mission of the Church, I wonder what you would write?

St Michael's has a statement of Purpose which sums up what we are about as a local church: Knowing God for ourselves, Growing as individuals and as a church, and Showing God's love in the world.

### Sheep without a shepherd

Listen to this version of the gospel reading and see what's wrong with it: *Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. But when he saw the crowds, and noticed that they were happy, self-sufficient people with good jobs, great marriages, well-behaved children, and living fulfilled and meaningful lives with all their medical worries met by the National Health Service and their future secured by generous pensions, he said to his disciples, "Nothing for me to do here; I'm going back to the carpenter's shop to design a new kitchen table".*

Actually, the correct version of Matthew 9:36 is rather different:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

The Bible uses the image of sheep quite a lot to describe people. Isaiah tells us that *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way* (Isaiah 53:6). This is reflected in BCP prayer of confession "we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep".

A lot of people don't think they do need God. Not most of the time, anyway. In fact, most people are far too busy working, looking after children and pursuing hobbies or voluntary work with whatever spare time they have that God doesn't usually get a look-in: until things start to go wrong. Perhaps after a few years working long hours in the office they suddenly realise that the spark has gone out of their marriage, or the kids have become teenagers and become estranged. Perhaps after assuming that bad things only happened to other people they or someone they love has a serious accident or faces a terminal illness and they find themselves up a creek without a paddle. Then maybe God could come in useful. But they're not sure if he's really interested.

We all need a Shepherd, and if we are to make a success of our lives in the way God intended, we need God to be our shepherd, as Psalm 23 reminds us. Jesus came to earth to be our Good Shepherd, and if we're to live lives that are healthy in every way, including spiritually, we need to follow him. A lot of people out there either don't realise that they need God, or are looking for

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1 Starbucks <https://www.starbucks.co.uk/about-us/company-information/mission-statement> accessed 17/6/2017

2 Amazon <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Amazon/about/> accessed 17/6/2017

3 Microsoft <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/about/default.aspx> accessed 17/6/2017

him without anyone to show them how to find him.

### **A Harvest without workers**

When Jesus describes the crowds as “sheep without a shepherd”, he is already on his own mission, preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God, casting out evil spirits and healing the sick. But even Jesus needs help. That is why he tells his disciples that “*the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest*” (9:38). If we are beginning to see the world, and those around us, in the way Jesus sees them, our first response should be prayer.

But be careful what you pray for - you might be part of the answer to your prayers! In the next verse, Jesus summons the twelve and sends them out to do his work. Here, the mission is to those in the community around them “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6), but at the end of the Gospel, before Jesus ascends to heaven, he gives his followers the Great Commission: *go and make disciples of all nations* (28:19).

In today's Gospel we see Jesus proclaiming the Kingdom of God in both word and deed: as well as speaking to people about God, he also heals the sick. Our mission should combine both word and deed. We could sum up the a mission of the Church in a statement like this: *Our mission is to share the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone and to demonstrate God's love for the world in practical and tangible ways.*

### **The parable of the life-saving station**

I'm going to leave you with a modern parable, which challenges us to consider whether the Church is really fulfilling the mission that Jesus gave us, and what our own attitude to the church and its mission is. It is called *The life-saving station*.

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time, money, and effort for the support of the work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

The newly decorated and exquisitely furnished lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, a sort of clubhouse. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decoration, however, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in the boat loads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. They dripped on the rug and water-stained the furniture in the beautiful new club. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection**

*The parable of the life-saving station*

1. Where did things go wrong in the life-saving station?
2. What similarities can you see between the story of the live-saving station and the Church?
3. How could your local church better fulfil the mission which Jesus has entrusted to us? What part are you playing, or could you play, in this?

*Thinking about your own life<sup>4</sup>*

Write a mission statement for your own life, as a disciple of Christ.

You might like to answer this in terms of the different roles that you fulfil, e.g. in your family, in your workplace, in the decisions you make about your financial and physical resources, in your spiritual and intellectual development.

Write some headings and under each write down what fulfilling your mission in that context would look like (use the back of this sheet).

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4 The idea for this comes from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey