

The Big Topics - Part Five: Mission

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[0 : 00] If you've been here over these past month or so, or you've caught up online, you'll be aware that we're on the final lap now of our five-week stroll through some of the big topics, shall we say, of the Christian faith.

So we've looked at sin, the cross, hell, heaven, and we're on to today's fifth and final topic, which is mission. Mission. And it's a bit of a strange old word, I think, mission, because it tends to, certainly in my mind, either conjure up images of Mission Impossible and either the old TV series or the more recent films, perhaps, depending on your vintage or whether your old VHS cassette copies of that old 60s series of Self-Destructed by Now or Not.

Mission Impossible, on the one hand, that seems to be associated with mission. The other hand, though, in my mind again, it seems to be associated, perhaps, with overseas missions and missionaries, and whether we picture the efforts of yesteryear with pith helmets and all that, or more modern missionary efforts often incorporate in healthcare and education, that seems to be often what we think about when we hear this word mission.

And yet it's a lot simpler than that. Mission, in a nutshell, simply means sent or literally to send. It's got the same root as the word dismiss, you know, when we send someone away.

I guess we could ask that if mission is all about being sent. Who does the sending? Well, it's God. It's God. He is, by nature, ascending God. So there's a sense in which we might say he sent Jesus into the world, ascending, which Jesus himself acknowledges when he says this.

[1 : 45] He says, as the Father has sent me, is the first half of what he says. But then God, in turn, it seems, also then sends us out into the world.

So Jesus continues, as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. Sent to do what? Well, at his heart, mission is all about the outworking, if you like, the working out, the expression, the sharing, the living out of our faith sent out by God in order that other people might encounter and embrace his love in their own lives.

And so what I want to do today, if possible, is to look at some of the ways in which our mission, this sense of being sent out by God to share his love with other people, how we share our faith. Look at how might that be shaped by some of the implications of what we've been considering over recent weeks with these four topics, namely sin, the cross, hell, and heaven.

So, settings out, round one, let's begin with what we looked at the first week, which was sin. And we saw, if you recall, the idea that sin is about missing the mark of all that God would have us be.

If you're here or you're caught up online, you'll remember we were talking about sin, perhaps having these different levels or layers to it, ranging, say, from personal decisions that we might make.

[3 : 19] We talked about the idols, the priorities that might lie behind the decisions that we make and feed into perhaps poor decisions. But also, we talked about the bigger problem, the bigger sin, capital S if you like, of evil and the way in which this takes hold sometimes in systems and organizations in our country or around the world.

So, in terms of mission then, and sharing the good news of God's love in action, at its best, I'd suggest mission will have an impact on each of these three levels of sin, on the personal decisions, on the idols that lie behind them, and on the big picture of evil.

And so, thinking for a start, maybe just about personal decisions, I'd say often, God sends us out, God gives us a mission to help other people avoid sin, to help them turn away from stuff that is wrong and instead get closer to the target of doing things God's way.

For example, a couple of weeks ago now, I had a conversation with a guy in the Vic one night who was planning, he told me, to visit a medium to try and make contact with a loved one of his who died.

Now, when he told me this, I think, I know, I know, and I knew then, the Bible warns us off trying to contact the dead.

[4 : 51] You know, primarily, it seems, because it opens up all sorts of risky spiritual channels which are beyond our control or our understanding. And so, in my gut, I wanted to protect this guy from missing the mark, if you like, protect him from going against what God would want for him.

And as I'm hearing him saying, oh, he's booked in this appointment to see this medium and so on, I'm just quietly asking God just to give me the right way to gently suggest an alternative, better way for him to go rather than visiting this medium.

And so we carry on talking and I kind of surprised myself really or perhaps God surprised me through me, I don't know, but I found myself starting to affirm him, not in his decision to go and see the medium.

We didn't necessarily talk about that at that time, but I was rather affirming him in his grief and affirming his desire to want to hear from his loved one who'd passed on.

I didn't want to judge him because it's totally understandable, I think, to want to speak again to those we've lost. So instead, I just felt prompted to primarily identify with his sense of loss.

[6 : 08] I guess we might say empathise with him to enter into that grief in a way that I could. Now interestingly, having said, I get that, I get that desire and I understand where you're coming from with that.

That affirmation, that seemed in the conversation to open up things further. As it turned out when we explored it a bit more together, that what he was really looking for was firstly to know that his loved one was okay.

and secondly, to get some advice on a couple of big decisions that he had coming up when he used to run those kind of decisions past his loved one.

In a nutshell, I guess he wanted peace on the one hand, assurance that his loved one was safe in the afterlife. But he also wanted guidance, guidance for decisions.

But as I said, I knew he was missing the mark, I knew he was looking for that peace and guidance in the wrong place. And I use missing the mark, it's difficult to know if it's a sin, but for me it felt it wasn't in line with what God would want for his life.

[7 : 13] And so what came to mind as this conversation developed really was to share with him just gently, just a little bit of the story of Lazarus in the Bible. And in particular the bit where Lazarus, just before Lazarus is raised to life again by Jesus.

I mean we're told that Jesus calls out to this dead man Lazarus when he's in the tomb. Jesus says, Lazarus, come out. And Lazarus does.

And he's alive again. And I just gently offered to him really my understanding of that aspect of the story in that I think it shows that Jesus would seem to be able to not only speak to the dead but to have the dead hear him.

and so I said to this guy, look I understand or I can begin to understand how much you want to speak to your loved one and you want assurance and you want guidance from them.

I get that. But actually I don't think it's all that wise to open up these spiritual channels in that way. In fact my suggestion would be to ask Jesus directly, you know, to ask Jesus to give you reassurance that your loved one is okay.

[8 : 25] To ask Jesus to give you guidance because there's no one finer to get guidance from. Indeed if you want to, I said I actually don't see anything wrong with asking Jesus to somehow pass on a message to your loved one because from this story I believe that Jesus can speak to those who have died.

Now essentially I was encouraging this guy to pray to talk to Jesus with where he was at. I just didn't use those words I suppose. On the one hand you might be thinking as I'm sharing that you might be thinking not sure about that way of understanding the story of Lazarus and all that.

You might question that interpretation of it. Leaving that aside for one moment the kind of in and out of that Bible passage what I think is more important in terms of mission and faith this idea of sharing God's love with those who are perhaps going wrong is the importance of two things from that experience.

Firstly I'd say it's the importance of the need to empathize to try to understand those desires that lie behind people's personal decisions to do things their own way rather than perhaps God's way.

Secondly after empathizing I'd say it's then essential that we try and find a way to point people towards Jesus and a way in which he has a better way of meeting those desires whatever those desires are in this case is desires for assurance and for guidance two ways in which I think Jesus comes out as a top trump in those ways you see I reckon empathizing it's important to empathize before we evangelize shall we say empathize before being evangelizing only then offer the good news of Jesus because we've already proved perhaps that rather than judging them we've entered into how they were feeling and that might be a journey we can make forward with them I don't know maybe next time someone shares something with you about a personal decision they're making that you know in your gut is the wrong thing that you know will be missing the mark I'd suggest try this route of empathizing with that desire first all the time asking God to maybe steer that empathy into an opportunity to share something of

[10 : 50] Jesus being the far better way that's one mission approach that we could explore in terms of how we deal with sin in terms of personal decisions but we probably need I would suggest a different approach when it comes to say what we might call the overall problem of evil big sin and the way in which society can be affected by sin on an institutional or organisational level so for example at the moment I'd want to affirm initiatives like the Litchfield emergency night shelter scheme which was recently started in which local churches in Litchfield are providing overnight accommodation for those sleeping rough this winter and I know there's some from this church who are getting involved in that indeed I say homelessness is one indicator that our system the way we organise our society is not only flawed but the fact that homelessness exists and is on the rise it's an indication that the system is not influenced by the things of God and if it's not influenced by the things of God we could argue that it's influenced by the things which are evil no one should be homeless

I think that's a given and the way in which homelessness has been allowed to rise and keep on rising is for me an indicator of a system which in some ways is sinful because it's grossly we might say missing the mark of what God would want for a society now if we were thinking how will we get mission involved with that kind of problem of homelessness I'd say it needs to be far more proactive than simply empathy and evangelism those two things won't solve people sleeping rough on the streets it needs practical action and that's what some churches in Litchfield have decided to do and God bless them for that but I guess aligned to that practical action would also be the need to campaign and influence political policies so that homelessness and its causes can be tackled and I'd say it's all part of this expression of what mission looks like in response to what we might call systemic evil I was struck by a quote from Dietrich

Bonhoeffer read again the other day he said this 100 years old now this quote but it's out he said we are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice but to drive a spoke into the wheel itself see whether it's homelessness or poverty environmental damage or refugee crises I'd say God sends us part of our mission he gives us is to tackle the causes of those evils on a systemic organisational level by actively championing compassion and generosity care and hospitality as being at the heart of the practical outworking of the good news of Jesus some thoughts perhaps on mission and how it might affect or our views on sin and how that might affect our approach to mission that's one but let's turn to look at the implications of mission from the conclusions that we considered the other week in terms of the cross and again if you were here

I suggested that the cross which this term which means really the death and the resurrection of Jesus said what I thought was at its heart is this word liberation liberation freedom freedom from sin freedom from death in order that we might receive life in all its resurrected goodness so what might mission which has liberation at its heart look like well I guess if we were to ask people and neighbours and so on wider society what they might feel they need liberating from I imagine they might say all sorts of things perhaps along the lines of anxiety or illness loneliness addiction abuse all manner of things which hinder wholeness and the fullness of life which Jesus has in mind and so I'd say that mission and the good news of God's love in action mission happens wherever liberation takes place it's a pathway project for example it's a prime example where liberation is offered and achieved freedom from abusive relationships escape from domestic violence opportunity for new life a new resurrected life we might say where oppression and abuse are left behind and it's particularly sort of pertinent this week really is over the last week

I've given pathways number to three separate women whose situations I've become aware of in a sense I'm giving that number sending them on to the agency who can help them and I'm so grateful for Kathy and everyone at Pathway because it's a way to point people practically to ways in which God's love can be worked out in action Pathway is part of God's mission which is in line with the liberating message of the cross and incidentally I think we'd do well not to underestimate how important how crucial this practical liberating love in action is for example the other week in our session on hell we looked at Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats and often as with that week the focus and when we look at that parable is on the judgment side of it you know

[16 : 40] Jesus separates out the sheep from the goats the righteous from the unrighteous but what's fascinating when we read that parable in full is the criteria by which people are judged by Jesus to have lived a righteous life in fact in that parable seems to have nothing to do with belief or doctrine nothing to do with theology or even conversion and a basis for Jesus affirming people as righteous in that parable is how they've treated those less fortunate than themselves feeding the hungry welcoming the stranger clothing the naked caring for the sick visiting the prisoner it's a parable which suggests that Jesus welcomes into heaven those who show love in action even if they wouldn't claim to be his followers says this when the people who are caring for others he said when did we see you hungry and feed you when did we see you a stranger and invite you in and Jesus replies

I tell you the truth whatever you did for one of the least you did for me and we get under the skin of that parable I think it turns our ideas about who's in and who's out turns them on its head where love in action is held as being all important more important it would seem than even a recognition or belief in the person of Jesus in this parable who is saved the Christian who does nothing to help other people or the non-Christian who spends their time caring for those in need who is saved in that parable chew on that one over lunch stick that in your pipe and smoke it and see what comes out I tell you moving on though moving on what about hell and how does our view of hell shape our mission well again to recap I proposed a couple of weeks ago a number of reasons why I believe there is a way out of hell and into heaven for those who repent and turn to Jesus even if that repentance comes after death it's not that this repentance is easy or cheap or that God is simply nice and lets people in or rather my point or the point

I was trying to make was that God's love is such that he will never turn away anyone who genuinely turns to him and I appreciate that talk split opinions somewhat I fully appreciate that and thank you for the various messages and emails and stuff which have come in there's been a few along with the park ones as well this week so I will get back to you if haven't done already but I do appreciate people engaging and sort of dialoguing on that one with me which is good so I don't want to go into the ins and outs of what we were saying every week if you want to catch up and you haven't done so do so online but let's just briefly explore one way in which our views of hell might shape the way we engage with mission in particular after the talk they have a week a number of people said to me well what's the point of evangelism then why do you want to tell people the gospel if eventually everyone can get into heaven I don't know how you'd answer that what's the point of evangelism what do you see as perhaps the main motivation you've got for sharing your faith and I have to say

I was intrigued by that response that question what's the point of evangelism then if everyone eventually gets into heaven because for me it raises questions about what we think we're offering people when we give them the gospel I mean if our main motivation in sharing our faith with people is to save them from going to hell then it strikes me as being a very limited view of what the good news of Jesus is all about rather I'd say sharing our faith is all about offering people the chance to know Jesus in a personal way you know a relationship that brings hope and meaning and peace and joy and life in all of its fullness starting in this life now I don't share my faith because I want people to avoid hell I share my faith because I want people to know Jesus but if the good news is reduced to being either a way out of hell or even a ticket to heaven

I'd say we're in danger of missing the point say actually we're in danger of missing the person of Jesus in that in fact even if there was no heaven and there was no hell and this life was it I would still be a Christian and I would still share Jesus with people because I believe his love is supreme and his way is the best way indeed it's the only way to truly live regardless of how short or finite our time here on this world is similarly someone else asked me about persecuted Christians and why if eventually everyone ends up in heaven should they be willing to suffer in this life for their faith I think I'd suggest the same answer people suffer for their faith because they love Jesus and that love means that not only are they unwilling to deny

[22 : 30] Jesus above all they want people to know his transforming love in their lives and that truth is so important to them that they're willing to risk their lives to share it I went to a few years back now I went on a trip to Egypt with Open Doors which is the persecuted church charity and we spent some time in Cairo with local Christians who were having a hard time being a Christian in Egypt and we met with one family in particular on a housing estate and we had dinner with them and they were sharing a story of how a Christian neighbour of theirs had a daughter and across the courtyard from them this neighbour's daughter had been pushed off the balcony because she was a Christian and she fell to her death this is their neighbour's daughter killed for her faith and you can imagine that was a heavy conversation to have and we asked these neighbours how do you cope with that pressure how do you cope with that awareness that actually someone might be able to get you any moment as they did with your neighbour's daughter and their response was incredible because one guy in particular said we carry on because we love Jesus there's no other way to live we love

Jesus we want to put him first we don't want to deny him but actually we love our neighbours because that's what Jesus tells us to do and we want them to know the love of Jesus in their lives too even if they want to kill us we love them and we want them to know Jesus and for me there was no indication that they were concerned or even motivated by anything to come it was simply they wanted people to know Jesus in the here and now and God would look after the rest and that for me with these people on the front line of persecution that was a humbling conversation to have how sold out they were for their faith and for the importance of Jesus' love in their lives so yeah I don't get if I'm honest this question about why we wouldn't share our faith if everyone does eventually somehow get to heaven which in many ways leads us on to the final topic that we've looked at which is heaven itself and again if you recall last week the idea shared was that heaven as we might traditionally understand it you know life after death we shared last week was that it's only a temporary place rather than the book of Revelation tells us that ultimately a new heaven and a new earth will be recreated and heaven and God will come and join with earth and us as his people in a new combined super duper creation life after life after death as we said last week and so I would say the implication that ultimately heaven is going to come to earth and there's a new creation that's going to happen

I would say the implications for that understanding of heaven implications are huge because the outworking of our faith is all about building for and the anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom of heaven coming to earth life we might say in all its fullness it was fascinating though in the bible when the new heaven and the new earth are described in Revelation in many ways it reads like a kind of town planner's dream there's detail in it talks about wide well lit streets lined with beautiful buildings trees and a river running through the heart of this new city God it would seem is in the business of the detail of community life in the business of transforming community life and that I would suggest should be at the centre of what a heaven shaped understanding of mission should be all about for example we held the town meeting here on Wednesday night when we invited people from the community to come in here and discuss the opportunity that we've got to take on the lease for the park next door and we had 150 160 people here which was great and having gone through some of the pros and the cons of taking on the lease when asked for a show of hands towards the end of the night an overwhelming majority of people said that they were up for seeing if we can make the lease work for us as a community and so despite their being if you were here you might recall a couple of vocal folks who seemed more keen to complain about what's wrong with the park at the moment rather than imagine what could be right about it in the future it was on the whole a really positive meeting because there was enthusiasm you know there was an undercurrent of optimism that a better park that better community life is possible and I was encouraged by that atmosphere because whether people realised that who were here or not that's what the coming of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven I would say is all about this idea that a better life is possible both here and now and in the world to come

I mean a better park you know a better grass trees all that kind of stuff a better park will be great in and of itself and although there's a shed load of work to do over 50 people have already signed up to be actively involved in all sorts of ways and well over half of those are not church folks which is brilliant it's what we wanted and there's a chance this morning to add your name to that number as well should you want to be involved in any way next door but even more importantly than the trees the grass the rise and all that next door even more importantly than the park physically itself I'm even more excited at what an improved park could bring about in terms of things like increased community engagement a better and more varied range of friendships for people ways to be actively involved opportunities for folks to serve the greater good and so on always in which there's the potential to transform community life in this community and where there's deeper friendships where there's increased local engagement where there's more active involvement where there are ongoing works of service going on the nice thing is because those things are good in and of themselves all of a sudden

I'd say it becomes a far more natural environment for us to be able to share something of the good news of Jesus the one who is behind it all not in a cheesy or a shoehorned or an in your face preachy kind of way not talking about that at all but simply because we're learning to share our lives and what they're about more deeply with those who we live alongside the spirit will be involved and guiding our conversations and I would suggest he will be willing us enabling us to bring something of his life his love his life into those conversations it's all good stuff this mission stuff but I think I'd be encouraging each of us to regularly daily if we can to ask God where he might be calling us literally where he might be sending us that day to be involved in his mission of putting his love into practice within our community and beyond could be the park could be the park could be a major way and if so great but equally you know where else might a place of mission be for you where's your mission field to use old language if you know that if one springs to mind whether it's

[30 : 41] Morrison's or Audi or workplace or pub or wherever it is great if you know that fantastic and today might be a good day to recommit that place that work to God in prayer but equally if you're not sure where God might be wanting to send you to share something of his love with and maybe today's a good day to ask God to show you that place where he might want to send you and share his love in any manner of ways God's got somewhere I'm sure to send each of us perhaps one of our jobs is to work out where that might be just to sum up really whether it's learning to empathise with people before we try and evangelise whether it's working to liberate people from that which holds them back whether it's realising that the gospel is primarily about offering people the joy of knowing Jesus or whether it's joining with others to build God's kingdom here on earth as in heaven our mission should we choose to accept it you know

God's mission which he's got for us is a way of life which is built on love peace joy and hope and that to me sounds like a life worth living Amen