

WE HAVE A MISSION

1. A MAN WITH A MISSION

Some weeks ago I heard David Cameron speak. It was just after the Crewe & Nantwich by-election. His supporters were not surprisingly cock-a-hoop. But interestingly David Cameron was not so gung-ho. The question the Tory party faced, he said, was not could they win the next election? Rather, 'Did they deserve to win the next election?'. He went on: *'To deserve to win, you need to have a sense of mission. Maggie Thatcher had a mission – her mission was to mend a broken economy. I too have a mission, he said – my mission is to mend our broken society'*.

Now whether or not David Cameron will be able to mend a broken society is another matter. That's a matter of politics.

However, the point which impressed me was he is clearly a man with a mission.

In that respect, and that alone, David Cameron has something in common with Jesus. For Jesus was a man with a mission.

Even at the age of 12 Jesus knew that he must be about his Father's business.

Jesus knew that he had come from God, and that he had a life to live for God.

We see this sense of mission when he preached in his home town of Nazareth.

Luke tells us that Jesus went to the front of the synagogue and read the opening two verses of Isaiah 61: **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people**".

Then, to everybody's amazement, Jesus personalised these words of Isaiah: **"This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read"** (4.21).

Today, said Jesus, 'a new era of salvation has been ushered in, a new era in which freedom is to be the watchword, and it all revolves around me – **"he has sent ME to proclaim liberty to the captives – to set free the oppressed"**.

Yes Jesus was a man with a mission – and his mission was to set people free.

As he said on another occasion: **"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"** (John 8.36).

But what was this freedom all about?

The story is told of a Marxist orator who was waxing eloquent on a street corner about the freedom we would all enjoy after the revolution.

- "When we get freedom", he cried, "you'll all be able to smoke cigars like that", pointing at an opulent gentleman walking by. "I prefer my fag", shouted a heckler.
- "When we get freedom", the Marxist continued, ignoring the interruption & warming to his theme, "you'll all be able to drive in cars like that", pointing to a sumptuous Mercedes which was driving by. "I prefer my bike", shouted the heckler".
- So the dialogue continued until the Marxist could bear his tormentor no longer. Turning on him, he said: "When we get freedom, you'll do what you're told".

The freedom Jesus offers is very different.

1. Jesus offers us freedom from guilt

Emmanuel Kant said two things convinced him of the existence of God: "*The starry skies above and the inner law within*".

This inner law - i.e. our conscience - plays a very powerful role in our lives.

- Many years ago Arthur Conan Doyle sent a telegram to 12 famous people, all of whom were highly respectable members of society holding considerable positions of importance. The message on each telegram was the same: "*Fly at once. All is discovered*". Within 24 hours all 12 had left the country.
- We might not react quite like that today, but the head of a large psychiatric hospital said: "*I could dismiss one half of my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness*".
- It is not just those suffering from mental health problems who are obsessed with forgiveness. Not long before she died in 1988, in a moment of surprising candour on TV, Marghanita Laski, one of our best-known secular humanists, said, "*What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me*".

Jesus was in the business of offering forgiveness.

That's why he died on the Cross. He died to free us from our past – he died to free us from our sin & guilt. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "**By the death of Christ we are set free, i.e. our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure**" (Eph 1.7-8a).

2. Jesus offers us freedom from self

Jesus not only deals with our sinful past, *he also deals with our sinful present*.

Many people when they think of sin associate it with specific & rather sensational misdeeds like murder, adultery and theft.

But in the Bible sin has a much wider connotation. In the Bible sin = basically "*self-centeredness*". S-I-N. For God's 2 great commandments are first that we love him with all our being, and secondly that we love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Sin by contrast is the love of self.

The fact that we human beings tend to be self-centered is evident from the rich variety of words in our language which are compounded with self.

There are more than 50 which have a pejorative meaning: e.g. words like *self-applause, self-absorption, self-assertion, self-advertisement, self-indulgence, self-gratification, self-glorification, self-pity, self-important, self interest....*,

Such self-centeredness is a dreadful tyranny.

Malcolm Muggeridge used to speak of "*the dark little dungeon of my own ego*" - a dungeon where we are engrossed with our own selfish concerns and ambitions.

But Jesus calls his followers to live for him, and not for self

He calls us to forget ourselves, to take up our Cross & follow him (Lk 7.23).

And when we do follow him, he sends us his Spirit to empower us to live as free men and women.

As Paul, the great apostle of Christian freedom, wrote: "**The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin & death**" (Rom 8.2-3)

Or as Peterson, *The Message* puts it: "***A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death***".

Yes, Jesus can make all the difference to the here and now.

He sends his Spirit, freeing us up from self, freeing us rather to love and to serve others. Our church, and 1000s of other churches too, are living signs of the Spirit at work in people's lives, turning them from serving self to serving others.

3. Jesus offers us freedom from fear

Jesus frees us from our past guilt, he frees us from our present self-centeredness, he *also frees us from fear of the future*.

For many of us life has been good – travel has been cheap if you've been prepared to travel cattle class with Ryan Air, jobs have been easy to find, and mortgages have been affordable. But suddenly there is a nip in the economic air: the cost of mortgages has rocketed, while the value of our homes has tumbled; people are being made redundant; fuel costs have escalated. And *we begin to fear for the future*.

There *are other fears too* - fear of sickness, bereavement, old age, and the ultimate fear, the fear of death.

I find it significant that time and again in the Gospels Jesus was telling his disciples not to be afraid.

They were not to be worried about what they should wear and what they should drink. Instead, said Jesus, "**be concerned with God's Kingdom and God will provide for you**" (Luke 12.34).

"**Even the hairs of your head have all be counted. So do not be afraid**" (Luke 12.7).

Yes storms may come, and our very existence may be threatened – but have faith in God – nothing can come between us and his love.

To quote the apostle Paul again: "**I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Rom 8.38f).

The good news is that in Jesus we can be secure, whatever life may throw at us.

Jesus offers us freedom from fear.

Yes, Jesus was a man with a mission

A mission to set people free

- from past guilt
- from present self-centeredness
- from fear of the future.

II. A CHURCH WITH A MISSION

We, the followers of Jesus, are also called to be people with a mission.
If all there is to church is Christian people meeting up with their friends on a Sunday morning, then we may as well shut up shop.
A church which exists for the sake of its own well-being is not a church, it's just a club.
A church by definition is a group of people which exists for the sake of its non-members – *a church is inevitably defined by its sense of mission.*

Our mission as a church to let others know the difference that Jesus can make to their lives.

But how are we going to do this? How are we going to fulfil our mission?

I want to suggest two ways we might do this in the coming month.

First, *by inviting friends to church* – and in particular *on Sun 28 September*.
Why 28 September? Well, it happens to be our Harvest Sunday – but it is also the date of this year's *Back to Church Sunday*.

The organizers of this Back to Church Sunday point to the fact that in a recent survey 74% of people in Britain claimed to be Christian – yet only around 6% regularly attend church. Back to Church Sunday is aimed at the 68%, who have some sense of allegiance to the Christian faith.

The idea is to encourage such people to give church a try (again).

Back to Church Sunday was first launched by the Diocese of Manchester in 2005.

A year later it was estimated that 900 people were attending church regularly in that dioceses as a result of being first invited on that first Back to Church Sunday.

It is estimated that 4000 people returned to church as a result of Back to Church Sunday in 2006.

The expectation is that now that 'Back to Church Sunday' has become a nationwide initiative involving all the mainline denominations, many more people will be attracted back to church.

But the truth is that many won't be attracted to church.

For some this is because church is associated with boredom.

For others it will be because church is just an alien experience.

But there is another option open to us:

Second, *by inviting friends to a decent meal* over which they can explore the meaning of life. I.e. we can invite them to Alpha.

This autumn we are running two Alpha courses:

Alpha-Lite for young people begins on Tuesday 9th September – and Alpha for adults begins on Monday 6th October.

In addition we will be running a kind of introductory course to Alpha for older people entitled 'Food for Thought', the first of which begins on Monday 29 September.

"If God did exist, what would you ask?" asks the Alpha poster in our Friendship Centre. Perhaps: What is the point of life? Why do people suffer? What happens when we die? Or indeed, what difference does Jesus make to life?

These are the kind of questions which Alpha addresses

But people won't just come to Alpha because of the publicity.
Nor will they come to church because of the publicity surrounding the Back to Church Sunday. They will only come as you and I play our part – and fulfil our mission.

The fact is that mission is not an optional extra.
A church without a sense of mission does not deserve to exist.
Mission is of the essence of church – it needs to be the essence of our church too.

This morning I want to encourage you to make the most of these two opportunities – and indeed of all the other opportunities which will come our way this autumn.
Let's ensure that the people of Chelmsford know that Jesus makes all the difference.