

The five marks of mission 3

To respond to human need by loving service

Two weeks ago we began a 5 week look at the 5 marks of mission; the 5 tasks which the Anglican Church recognises Christ has given to his people.

We began by thinking about how Jesus calls his church to “Proclaim the Good news of the Kingdom” and then last week to “teach, baptise and nurture new believers”.

This week, appropriately as the begin Christian Aid week, we are focusing on the third mark, or task, of the Church’s mission: “to respond to human need by loving service”.

I think we are increasingly realising that we can’t focus on this task in isolation.

It has been said that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime.

But if the man lives in a world where his fish are then taken from him, or where the lake by which he lives is so polluted the fish have all died, then he will still go hungry.

Meeting human need with loving service must, then, go hand in hand with the fourth and fifth marks of mission:

To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

But for today, lets ponder for a few minutes the call of Christ to meet human need with loving service.

And we should begin, as always with what Jesus himself said and did.

Jesus began his ministry by reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Luke 4.18-19

And this is clearly what Jesus did.

He didn't just preach and teach.

He showed love in practical ways to those in need – particularly through his healings and exorcisms.

It was often the poor and marginalised who were the recipients of his help.

The man who he raised from the dead he appears to have resurrected more for the sake of his mother who had been left all alone and helpless in world that the man himself.

Jesus' concern for the poor and the marginalised is no surprise.

Throughout the Old Testament God repeatedly called his people to care for the widow and the orphan – those unable to care for themselves.

God repeatedly told his people to care for the foreigner or alien – after all, they themselves knew what it was like to be slaves in a foreign land.

And it is surely no surprise that after Jesus' ascension the church grew and spread through not just the preaching of the kingdom and the teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers, but through the church's care of the poor.

"See how these Christians love each other" was one remark made of the early church. They it was who stayed in the cities in times of plague to care for the sick and bury the dead when everyone else was getting out as fast as they could.

And this has been our heritage for the last 2,000 years. It is the church which:

Founded hospitals and advanced medicine

Cared for the poor, widows, orphans,

Founded schools

Reformed working conditions and the treatment of prisoners

Worked to abolish slavery.

Of course, we haven't always got it right – but the good far outweighs the bad.

Today, it is the church which is:

Running street pastors to minister to those suffering from a night on the town

Setting up food banks

Running debt advice services and credit unions

Promoting fostering and adoption

Caring for and supporting family life

Why?

Because God's heart is full of love and compassion and when we show love and compassion we join our hearts with his.

Because we show our love for God in loving others made in his image.

Because we believe each and every human being is of infinite value, made in the image of God.

We won't stand by and say, "That's a shame but it's not my problem".

Today is the first day of Christian Aid Week.

This year Christian Aid are wanting to share with us their work in Sierra Leone.

One project they are supporting is the building of hospitals and training nurses, so that fewer women die in child birth.

I know that sadly some women in our country do die in childbirth. Sadly, not every baby arrives safely in the world.

But when my children were born I was in no doubt that the odds were severely stacked in our favour by a first class medical system and my wife or child would not be left to die for want of medical expertise or equipment.

Why should it be any different in Africa?

Why are 'their' lives worth less than 'ours'?

Christian Aid of course offer disaster relief, but they are also seeking to teach men to fish, and lobby governments to ensure a fair distribution of resources and raise the issues of environmental care so the lake isn't too polluted to support fish.

We should be supporting the work of Christian Aid as best we can; and indeed other Christian agencies which do similar work.

But perhaps today we need to also think about what we can do to “meet human need with loving service” in our families, community and places of work.

This is not, of course, without its moral dilemmas.

When we are asked by the man sat by the tube station for some money should we see what change is in our pocket? When he’s the fifth one that morning should we keep going?

These are not easy questions to answer. But this morning I wanted to offer four suggestions for how we might tackle this task of “responding to human need with loving service”.

1. Tune in to God’s heart – try to see people as God sees them. If you find it hard, pray for God to give you a heart of compassion and a desire to help.
2. Be intentional – the bible seems to set tithing (giving 10% of your income) is the minimum most of us should be aiming for. The Church of England suggests 5% to church and 5% to other good causes. I’d suggest 10% to church and then more to good causes. But prayerfully decide what you can give to good causes and then set up the direct debits. Jesus said that where our heart is, there our treasure will lie. I think its also true that our heart often follows our money. Regular giving to meet human need makes a statement of what we believe to be important – and our hearts will follow the decisions we’ve made in our head and the actions we take with our hands.
3. Be relational – Giving to good causes is good. But its even better when its accompanied by finding out about the people our money is helping... and praying for them. And giving to good causes is just the tip of the iceberg. Not all human need is financial; or can be met by throwing money at a problem. How many of the problems people face in our society today are a result of loneliness, or neglect, or lack of support and advice? And how many problems people face can’t be ‘fixed’ but do become bearable with someone to listen, sympathise and pray with?

4. Start with what you can do. The good Samaritan helped the beaten-up traveller he came across. Maybe later he lobbied for better street lighting and policing of the road. Maybe later he set up a hospital for those who had suffered attack. Maybe he didn't! But he did start where he saw a need and could do something about it.

Meeting human need with loving service is not an optional extra for those of us who have committed to following Jesus.

It is part of who we are; because it is part of who God is.

It is about what we do with our money and our time; and also about making room in our heart for those who need it – even those people we find difficult or who cause us to despair.

We can't do it all.

We won't solve every problem.

But we can make a difference.

So shall we?