

THE MYSTERY & MOVEMENT OF MERCIFUL MISSION

In reading this then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's apostles and prophets. This mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:4-6)

Eastertide is bordered at one end with the celebration of the Resurrection and at the other end with Pentecost. However, approaching this season with a too linear or neatly sequential manner or mindset can deny us some of the riches of this time of year. In reality the liturgies, and especially the readings of Eastertide, focus simultaneously on the ongoing meaning and power of Christ's Resurrection, Ascension and, as a fruit of that, the gift and work of the Holy Spirit. Seeing how these are linked is really important. We read the account of the early church as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles which is really the Acts of the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) in the Apostles – and not just in them but more generally in the church which is the Body of Christ and also the Temple of the Holy Spirit. A major and central part of the Acts of the Apostles is the mission of the church, this being a sharing in the Mission of God

The mystery of an expanding mission

In short we see how, starting in Jerusalem it goes out to the ends of the (then known) world. More specifically it goes from Jerusalem Jews to Samaritans (Jewish 'half-castes') and then on to Gentiles (ie with no Jewish connections in the past at all) (cf Acts 1:8). From our vantage point in history and our standing as Gentile believers, we read this as normal and to be expected. But it was not obvious then. Both these groups were generally disparaged, despised and dismissed by Palestinian Jews of this period. This outlook was reinforced by generations of hostility and persecution of the Jews and also by a large number of Jewish religious practices and cultural features designed to reinforce and protect distinct Jewish identity and often its ethnic purity too. It was as though there literally was a wall of separation, especially between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14).

Indeed, could this expansion of what was then a group within Judaism really be part of the plan and work of God? The tensions and issues to be overcome in facing up to this are evident in the Acts and also in many places in the writings of Paul and the issues he wrestles with – despite the fact that he is called to be the 'Apostle of the Gentiles'. He is at times amazed, surprised, perplexed and anguished by the various turns of events. He remains convinced that God is at work in all of this and he praises God for this and seeks to ponder and understand the mysterious yet wise way God brings his plan about. Indeed, that Christ's work was meant for both Jews and Gentiles was a mystery – and in fact at the core of the original New Testament use of the word 'mystery'. "This mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6)"

From one people to all peoples; from a divided to a united humanity

In this we see the bountiful flowering and huge impact of what had started with a very narrow focus. There is a deliberate move from a focus on one people and nation to a focus on all peoples and nations. Yet all this is consistent with God's promises! Jesus was a Jew and so were all those he chose as apostles. His earthly mission was conducted almost entirely among

Jews – though there are exceptions – and clearly noted as surprising exceptions – of him meeting with, ministering to Samaritans and Gentiles and clearly affirming and approving of them too. None the less, he makes clear that his mission is to the House of Israel, to its lost sheep, and he affirms the truth of its core beliefs and practices and that God has truly chosen the Jews – centred on Jerusalem – as his people. However, they are also his instruments to reach and bless all people. This is part of their Scriptures and Jesus knew it and is identified as God’s servant for this purpose. “It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth (Isaiah 49:6). Simeon had prophesied this at Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:29-32). Indeed, in John’s Gospel it is precisely at the point when some Greeks want to meet with Jesus that Jesus publicly exclaims that his hour has come and prays publicly that the Son of Man be glorified and with him, the Father (John 12:20-28).

More Rejection, more mercy and more mission!

Yet, this moment, this ‘hour,’ is arrived at after the majority of the Jews and certainly the leaders of the Religious establishment have rejected him and are actively looking for ways to kill him. Jesus knows that it is through dying that he will achieve his goal. By being rejected he can make forgiveness and peace available. And so Jesus dies and rises and then takes the initiative in mission and reconciliation, quickly offering the apostles, who had also abandoned him, his peace. (John 20:20). Such is his mercy! It is always unmerited or, put another way, we qualify for it by being sinners (and more generally broken) and being honest about that! (Ephesians 2:5-6). He then immediately gives them a mission to spread this mercy (John 20:21-23). Rejection leads to mercy and an expanding mission! This may seem a strange combination but it seems to me that this is precisely the New Testament pattern. The 12 first offer the same mercy they have received to the Jews, starting with those in the city most directly responsible for his rejection and death. So the mission of the church begins. Some accept it and the church grows. Rejection of the message also happens and it is actively resisted. This leads to the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 6-7), and a wider persecution. This leads to wider mission. The Samaritans are evangelised and accept the faith (Acts 8). Then Gentiles start accepting the faith (Acts 10). Paul, formerly a persecutor of the church, is at the fore of this work. In fact on his missions he preaches first to Jews. Typically it is if and when they reject his message that he then offers it to Gentiles (e.g. Acts 13), often giving them much attention and using their premises etc. Many come to believe and thus many of the Pauline churches have a mixture of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. Both have faith and believe in Jesus as chosen by God and raised from the dead and have received his mercy through faith. The mission goes on in this way and expands profoundly. Dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles (or at least some of each) begin to fall and they are reconciled and united (Ephesians 2:11-22). God led the way, preparing people and providing solutions –with plenty of surprises throughout!

What can all this teach us? Initial rejection does not stop God’s mission or exhaust his mercy. If anything the opposite is true! Nor must it stop us. We should not shrink away or look mainly for self-protection. Also, our need of mercy is a great leveller and allows fellowship and unity to be achieved across all sorts of cultural, ethnic and religious barriers. This should encourage and envision us in the many challenges we face today. Mission is not an insoluble problem; it is a rich mystery –a Divine one– full of mercy, movement and hope, to be generously entered into! God goes ahead!

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