God's Mission

Now, even outside the church, the word 'mission' gets bandied used a lot. You hear about a company having a '*mission* statement', or you say of someone 'he's a man on a *mission*.' When a job's completed, it's '*mission* accomplished.' Well, this morning I want us to look at God's mission. What is God up to in the world, what end is he trying to achieve, what is he relentlessly working towards? What would it mean for God to say, 'mission accomplished!'? And once we've answered that, we've got to answer another question, which is how can you be a part of God's mission?

You see, in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, one of the characters says the famous line, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' Well, what if that's true? What if there is a divine drama going on? What if God knows where this story of life is heading, how it's going to finish, and he invites you to be a player, to find your part, on this the greatest stage ever? If that's the case, you don't want to be stood in a corner of the stage acting out your own little story, do you? You don't want the divine director asking you at the end, 'er, what did you think you were doing on stage?'

But, before we can understand what God is up to in the world, and how we can find our part in that, we've got to answer another question, because this one profoundly influences the others.

What is wrong with the world?

Now, of course how you answer that depends on your worldview, doesn't it? Ask someone on the left and they'll tell you it's inequality, of wealth distribution or educational opportunities. Ask someone on the right and they'll say it's a lack of personal responsibility or the curtailing of individual freedom. Or, maybe you've heard how at the turn of the last century the Times newspaper invited a series of essays from distinguished people on the subject 'what's wrong with the world?' And in response, GK Chesterton sent a wonderfully short letter that read, 'Dear Sir, I am, yours, GK Chesterton.' And as well as being wonderfully short, it's wonderfully honest isn't it? What's wrong with the world, I am. I'm what's wrong with the world. And when we have those moments of self-insight, we can agree with Chesterton. I'm part of the problem. But just for a moment compare Chesterton's response to the outpouring of support and identification that followed the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris: Je suis Charlie. I am Charlie. But nobody said, I am ISIS, I am as wrong as those murderers. So whilst we agree with Chesterton, our sense of identification with what is wrong with the world only goes so far, doesn't it?

But the fact that there is something wrong, none of us would deny. Because whether it is Syria, or human trafficking, or corruption, or relational breakdown, or disease, the problems of the world result in misery for millions. And we see these things, maybe even experience these things, and we know instinctively that this is wrong, that the world should not be like this. And the Bible tells us why.

You see, instead of the Bible opening as you might expect a religious book to open, with some gems of self-help advice, it begins by telling us what lies at the root of all the trouble. The world, Genesis tells us, was created perfect. And at

the end of creation it says that, God like a master craftsman, 'saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Gen 1:31). And he took our first parents, Adam and Eve, these representatives of all humanity, and put them in the garden to tend it. It's a great picture of the world as it should be, where man and nature work and sing in unison, all under God's loving oversight. The perfect world we all long for.

But things did not last like that. Like a storm coming in on a summer's day, darkness overshadowed the garden and evil infected it. And a serpent comes into the garden and begins to sweet-talk Eve. God had given them every tree in the garden to eat from, but, Genesis 2:17, "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." But the serpent makes Eve doubt God's goodness and he undermines God's word. He says, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened *and you will be like God*, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). And so at the root of this first temptation is the desire to be the one who decides for yourself what is good and evil, to decide for yourself what is right or wrong. To be autonomous of God. To change places with God. To be your own God.

And the man and the woman eat of that tree. And amazingly, the serpent was right, they didn't die, *physically*, at least not immediately, but they most assuredly died spiritually, inwardly. They looked at one another and realised that they were naked and for the first time in their lives they were consumed by shame. God came to them, walking in the garden, and they hid from him, alienated from the God whose company they once enjoyed. When God questions Adam and asks him whether he has eaten of the tree Adam replies, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree" (Gen 3:12). So first he blames his wife, and then he blames God for putting her there. And horizontal and vertical relationships start to crumble. And as a result of their sin creation is cursed, and now, rather than work being a pleasure it will be hard and frustrating, "In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (Gen 3:17-18). So, in the first few pages of the Bible, it's all there, isn't it? Shame, guilt, finger-pointing, blame-shifting, relationship breakdown, frustration at work, creation groaning under curse, death, and worst of all, alienation from God.

But what has that got to do with what's wrong with the world *today*? Because most of us, having grown up in a highly individualistic western culture, can read what happens in the garden and think it has absolutely nothing to do with *me,* or with us *today*. But you wouldn't think like that if you had grown up in a traditional culture. Because what the head of your family experiences, you experience. If he is honoured, the whole extended family is honoured. If he is shamed, the whole extended family is shamed. And because Adam is *the* representative figurehead of humanity, the head of our tribe, when he sins, we are all counted sinners. As Paul writes, 'Sin came into the world through one man' (Romans 5:12).

And just as Adam and Eve thought wrongly that they'd thrive if they could be autonomous of God, humanity has carried on in a similar fashion. Paul writes in

Romans 1, 'For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him… they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images…. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator.' (Rom 1:21-25).

So, can you see what's going on there? It's this terrible exchange. Adam and Eve wanted to be the ones who decided what was right and what was wrong for themselves, to swap places with God; but everyone does the same. Paul says we fail to honour God or thank God – we fail to recognise that he is God, not us, that he's the one from whom all good things come, and we're dependant on him. Instead, we want to think we're masters of our own destiny. And in his place, we create new gods. We worship created things, money, sex, power, sport, career rather than the Creator, thinking they will fill the void, but the problems - what is wrong with the world - multiply. Because as Luther pointed out, it is only by breaking the first commandment, to have no other god before God, that we can go on and break the other commandments against murder, or theft, or adultery, or coveting. That at the root of all these other problems is this one major root, that we do not honour God as God, but look for god-substitutes, thinking they will satisfy us. It is this failure to glorify God and have him at the centre of our lives.

So, what is God's solution to all this?

What is God Up To In The World?

Well, that is what the rest of the Bible is taken up with. It is God's mission. And through Old Testament prophets and New Testament writers, the Bible tells us that God is in the process of making everything new: that from every nation he is gathering a people who *will* glorify him as God. That the walls of division, and relationship breakdown, will themselves be broken down. That sin and death will be conquered. That man's alienation from God will be healed. And the Bible ends with the Book of Revelation, as the apostle John sees this vision of 'a great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Rev 7:9), worshipping God, doing the very thing that mankind has failed to do. And John hears a load voice from God's throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:1-4). So the garden will be restored, this world that we all long for. And the curse will be reversed and God will be glorified at the centre of his new, redeemed people.

But how is God going to achieve that mission?

Well, that's the extraordinary thing. He chooses a nation, a family and a man. Firstly, he chooses a nation. He takes Abram, and he makes a covenant with him. Genesis 12: 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall

be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3). So, from the nation of Israel, blessing will come to every nation. So it doesn't matter whether you are from the smallest tribe or the greatest super-power, it doesn't even matter if you're Dutch, God has signalled his intention to bless you.

And Isaiah the prophet speaks of how God gives Israel, his servant, as 'a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind… that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is 42:6-7, 49:6). So as Chris Wright says in his book, The Mission of God, when God chooses Israel, it's not that he's rejecting everyone else, other nations, it's for the sake of *everyone else*.

But from this nation God chooses one family. The family of David, and he makes a covenant with him. And as King, David wanted to build a house for God, but God said, 'no that's not going to happen, instead I am going to build a house, a kingdom that will never end, for you and for your son'.

And in Psalm 2, the psalmist sees a time coming when this great Son of David will reign, and the enemies of God will be humbled under his rule. And the Lord will say to him, 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps 2:8).

And the prophets look forward to this future King who will usher in a kingdom of peace and security. And under his rule, pain and sorrow, and sickness and death, and war and slaughter will end, and in their place, as Isaiah writes, 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Is 11:9).

Well, this past week we waited for a specific letter to come in the post, and we waited on tenterhooks. And Israel waited for that king to come. The chosen one, from the chosen family, from the chosen people. But of course, when he came he wasn't how anyone expected him to be. And in the greatest twist of all, God himself came, as the one born in the line of David, but he wasn't born into wealth and power, but into poverty. And rather than mix with the politically powerful or the religious elite, Jesus chose tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers: the very ones whose lives have been broken by sin. And rather than enter Jerusalem on a war-horse to slay his enemies, he came on a donkey. And you think, what kind of a king is that? Well, if we know what the prophet Zechariah foresaw hundreds of years before, we know what kind of king entered Jerusalem that day: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey… and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth' (Zech 9:9-10).

Well, great, but how does this humble king see his world-wide rule of peace and righteousness extend? Well that's what's amazing isn't it? He does it by taking upon himself all our sin, and all our guilt. And with the words nailed above him, 'this is the king of the Jews' at the cross Jesus took upon himself all the wrath of God that we deserve, and died in our place. He took the curse upon himself. All our failure to honour God as God, all our failure to thank God, all our failure to

have no god but God, and every other sin that grows out of that poisonous root, Jesus paid for it all.

And in his resurrection from the dead, Jesus became the first-fruits of God's new creation, of what will be in resurrection to come, of God's ultimate triumph over sin and death.

Now, when you've had some good news, how do you let others know? Facebook it? Whatsap? In those days, when a king had won a major battle, and the enemy had been defeated, the palace would send heralds out into every corner of the kingdom to proclaim the good news. And the Greek word for it was the *evangelion*: hear the *evangelion*, the good news, the gospel, the king has defeated the enemy! Let every household rejoice!

And Jesus took up that same word *evangelion*, and said "This *gospel* of the kingdom' this good news of the king's triumph over sin and death and alienation from God, "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14). And he charged his disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19) – literally of *every people group*, to call them to repent of their sins, and to invite them to come to the feast, to join the great throng from every tribe and tongue and people and nation that glorify God. To become a part of what Peter calls 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:9)

So that is what God is up to in the world. Through the gospel of his Son, the good news of all that Jesus has accomplished for us, God is calling a people to himself, who through repentance and faith in Jesus, are being transformed, into a new, holy nation, living for his glory. A people who will have no other God before him, who will love him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and love their neighbour as themselves. Who will live and work to see His kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven, while waiting for the ultimate fulfilment of his kingdom, when everything will be made new.

But, if that's what's wrong with the world, if that's what God's up to in the world. The last question that is:

What's your part in this?
Well, if you're not yet a Christian, the invitation is there for you to join God's new people. To repent of your sin, and put your trust in what Christ has done for you, and come and join his kingdom.

But for those of us who are already Christians, it is to hear the gospel and allow it to radically transform the way we live. To realise that each one of us is called to join God's mission, that rather than acting out our own little script in the corner somewhere, totally missing the plot, we find our place in his great drama,.

But what that will look like for each of us will differ. Because in one sense, every one of us is called to be a missionary to our own tribe, to those around us. But for

others of us, as you hear and understand the gospel, as you realise that God the Father sent his Son into the world to save you, you will hear the call from God to also go, to leave your comfort as Jesus left his, so that others might hear the good news from you and be saved.

For some of you it will mean doing practically what Paul writes in Romans 15, when he says, 'welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you' (Rom 15:7) – that as it sinks in how Christ has welcomed you, your heart will be moved with compassion for asylum seekers and refugees, to welcome them, and you won't see them as a nuisance, but you'll recognise that you too are an asylum seeker and have found welcome and refuge in Christ, and you'll want them to find the same.

Or as the gospel works on your heart, it will dawn on you that Christ gave up everything for you. How he who was rich became poor for you, and when that sinks in it will fundamentally change how you see your money – his money. And you'll work hard and you'll create wealth, to see that wealth deployed in ways that builds churches, and translates bibles, and cares for the poor, so that others might come to discover the riches of Christ that you know.

And for others of you, as you see the eternal king of heaven, kneeling in the garden, sweating in prayer, ready to carry your burden, you'll be moved to take up prayer for others, to help carry their burden, and you'll pray for your persecuted brothers and sisters around the globe, and you'll pray for the proclamation of the gospel here and in hard places like Burma.

And from your home you'll be praying that God's kingdom would come and that he would be glorified and that the mission of God to see the earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, would be fulfilled. That this gospel would indeed be proclaimed to every people group, that the end might come, because you'll know that that will just be the beginning of all that God has planned.