

Sermon - Mission: pathway to belonging

Based on: Amos 8.1–12; Colossians 1.15–29; and Luke 10.38–42

Previously ...

- Over the previous two Sundays we have been reminded that we are each *called* to be a disciple of Jesus, and then, like the apostles, *sent* - as a community - to continue the mission of Christ.
- We were reminded that one way of understanding and engaging with that mission is by means of the Five Marks, or characteristics, of Mission:
 1. *Telling* the Good News;
 2. *Teaching* that Good News;
 3. being the Good News through *tending* to those in need;
 4. being the Good News through *transforming* situations of injustice and violence; and
 5. being the Good News through actively *treasuring* God's creation.
- For the rest of this sermon series I'm going to focus primarily on the second Mark - that of teaching, baptising, and nurturing new believers.
- Of course we also need to be telling and being the Good News - the other four of the Five Marks of Mission.
- However, without maintaining and increasing the number of people joining us to tell and be the Good News, our capacity to do those things will diminish.
- In global terms God's church continues to increase, and yet we recognise the value of specifically our local church also prospering for the benefit of the local community.
- And not just local to Croydon, but also within Australia.

The census - and Amos

- The latest census figures reveal quite a dramatic story with regard to the faith of the Australian population.
- The percentage of Australians who regard themselves as Christian has dropped to 44%, whereas the percentage who state that they have no faith at all has risen to 40%.
- In that context, let's look briefly at the reading from Amos.
- Amos is given a vision of a basket of summer fruit.
- The metaphor here is understood to be that the summer harvest has been brought in, and the season of fruitfulness is now at an end.
- Once this last basket is consumed there will be no more.
- Most of the rest of the passage is about the unhappiness that will then be visited upon the faithless people, and then ends with:

*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord. (Amos 8.1–12)*
- Maybe the census reveals that the Australian population is beginning to experience a *famine ... of hearing the word of the Lord*.
- Or maybe the census reveals that there is a famine of hearing the word of the Lord *within* the Church.
- I am aware of how the Anglican Church has been caught up in an ongoing and schismatic conflict over the matter of including or excluding same-sex attracted people, instead of prioritising our unity in Christ.
- We've all been very aware of how the Church has not managed itself appropriately with regard to known abusers, to the extent that we now have to have secular organisations manage these issues for us - which is a damning indictment of systemic hypocrisy.
- This is why I suggest that maybe the churches are experiencing the kind of famine Amos describes, and that the increase in the faithless is a consequence of this.

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Our response? Intentional mission!

- Nevertheless, we can take heart in that Amos was inspired to utter his message as a wake-up call.
- It is now our turn to respond, and to respond in faith and with hope.
- We value the treasure that we share in, here at St John's, and the ways that God is both blessing us and blessing others through us and through our stewardship of what has been handed down to us.
- And we want others to join with us, so that they too can benefit from God's blessing and can likewise continue to bless others.
- Indeed, those who join us will be the next generation of parishioners.
- So I see three motivations for us to be intentionally and actively missional - that is, to undertake mission as described by the Five Marks of Mission, and to particularly focus on the second Mark of Mission:
 1. Called as disciples and sent as an apostolic community, Jesus has commissioned us to 'Go ... and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19)
 2. There is a growing harvest of people who can be introduced to the God who loves them, who blesses them, and who wants them to benefit from those blessings.
 3. And we want to ensure that the next generation of parishioners is lined up to join with us, and to take on the mantle of stewardship, just as we have taken it on from the generation before us.

The reality of missional growth at St John's

- Now I want to acknowledge that we do undertake some missional activities at St John's.
- One of these is participating in one of the two community meals service groups once a month - and that is to be celebrated.
- Nevertheless, this is part of the third Mark of Mission - responding to human need by loving service - and in itself does not grow the next generation of parishioners, which is the focus of the second Mark of Mission.
- There are a few other things that we do which are in line with the second Mark - but it should be quite obvious that they are not effectively growing the next generation here.
- While we do have new parishioners join us from time to time, they are usually people who have moved from another church for a variety of reasons:
 - they might have moved to Croydon, or
 - they might be attracted by some aspect of our faith community, or
 - their previous church might have closed down, and so on.
- What most of them have in common is that they were already members of the church - disciples of Jesus - before they joined us.
- When last did we baptise someone - either as an infant or as an adult - and for them to become an active member of St John's?
- I know of only one current parishioner who was baptised here as an infant, and is now a grandparent.
- I wonder if any current parishioners were confirmed here.
- The point is that most of this generation of parishioners here became Christians elsewhere, i.e. whatever we have been doing with regard to teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers has not been effective within this parish.
- So not only should we be motivated by Christ's commission for us, the burgeoning opportunity for harvest, and the desire to grow the next generation of parishioners - we should also face up to the reality that whatever we have been doing along the lines of teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers has not had any sustained impact at St John's for many years now.

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Mission Action: Team and Plan

- The good news is that we have started attending to this.
- Early in 2020, just before the Covid pandemic hit us, our Parish Council signed us up to the diocese's Parish Renewal Program.
- As part of that we formed the Mission Action Team, which has been led - with lots of Covid-related delays - to the point where earlier this year we discerned the first two actions in our new Mission Action Plan.
- One is to Connect with parents, particularly Kindergarten parents, to enable them to become in touch with the church community.
- The other is to be a Family-oriented church, to help families who are in touch with the church community to be able to belong.
- And we have made a start in enacting these.
- Nevertheless, they will not be enough in themselves, and also, they need to be undertaken by the whole of the St John's faith community, not just a few members.
- And so this sermon series is now the opportunity for all of us to be introduced to the bigger context of our Mission Action Plan.

Martha and Mary

- Before we do that, I'm going to take a brief look at today's gospel story.
- While the main focus is on the difference in attitude between Martha and Mary, it is helpful to understand that the whole story fits into the second Mark of Mission, because Jesus was doing aspects of that: he was teaching and nurturing new believers.
- Of course the work of hospitality that Martha was undertaking was enabling Mary, along with male disciples, to attend to learning from Jesus.
- However, Martha could only see that her sister was not helping.
- Perhaps another time the sisters could have teamed up, undertaken just enough active hospitality to ensure their guests were made welcome, and then joined in together with Jesus and the others.
- I don't think Jesus was chiding Martha for enacting hospitality, but rather for allowing herself to become distracted with it, and for being annoyed with Mary for benefiting from her own wholehearted focus.
- Let us keep this story in mind as we now look at the seven stages of the second Mark of Mission, that enables a non-believer to come to faith, and potentially mature enough to become a leader in the faith community.

Pathway to belonging

- I invite you to look at the schematic for the pathway to mission in the appendix below.
- It is taken directly from Ken Morgan's book titled *Pathways: Local Mission for All Kinds of Churches*.
- Ken Morgan was running the diocesan Parish Renewal Program, and he led our Mission Action Team through this.
- There's quite a bit of detail that we will examine more closely next Sunday.
- For now, we can think of each of the seven columns as being seven stepping stones, taking someone from the wilderness side of the River Jordan, safely across the river to the Promised Land side.
- We might have assumed that getting from one side to the other was merely a giant leap of faith - maybe with a baptismal splash at take off or at landing.
- But for nearly everyone there is actually a multi-step process, even if we are unaware of it at the time: for most of us this has happened organically.
- However, if we are going to be actively intentional about this aspect of our mission here at St John's, then it helps to have a plan of how to proceed to lay down some well-spaced well-shaped stepping stones to enable people to have a clear pathway across to our side of the river.

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The stepping stones

- So as we start to bring today's sermon to a close, I'm just going to name each stage that needs a stone for people to step on to walk forwards.
- 1. Potential Contact: this stage describes people we don't know and who know no one in the church - the stepping stone meets their need for someone to make contact with them.
- 2. In Touch: this stage describes people who know at least one person in the church - the stepping stone meets their need for an attractive group in which to belong.
- 3. Belonging: this stage describes people who know several people in the church and are a regular part of a church group - the stepping stone meets their need for an opportunity to find out more about the Christian faith and a reason to consider commitment.
- 4. Embracing The Gospel: this stage describes people who are interested in knowing about Jesus - the stepping stone meets their need to hear the gospel and establish a relationship with God.
- 5. Following Jesus: this stage describes people who are in a process of learning, obeying and growing in faith - the stepping stone meets their need for teaching, encouragement and accountability to support Christian life.
- 6. Serving In Ministry: this stage describes people who have identified gifts, skills and ministry, and are serving others in Jesus' name - the stepping stone meets their need for opportunities and training to identify and develop their gifts.
- 7. Leading Ministry: this stage describes people who take up a leadership role - the stepping stone meets their need to realise their potential to exercise either lay or ordained leadership in this or another church community.

Anticipating next Sunday

- So, having been reminded of the Five Marks of the mission Jesus has commissioned us to continue, we have acknowledged what motivates us to particularly attend to the second Mark - of teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers.
- And we have been introduced to the seven stepping stones that we need to ensure are both in place and lined up with each other, to enable people to become believers, and active members of the church community.
- Over the last two Sundays of July we will explore these further, with both what we are currently doing and what we are planning to do.
- I'm now going to conclude with part of today's reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians, because it fits so well.

I became [the church's] servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me. (Colossians 1.25–29)

- May Paul's words in turn inspire us.
- Amen.

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Appendix

Schematic from *Pathways: Local Mission for All Kinds of Churches*, by Ken Morgan (2017) - see www.pathways4mission.com

Stage	<i>Description of people at this stage & what they need</i>	<i>Aim of activity at this stage</i>	<i>Example activities (the stepping stones)</i>
#1 Potential Contact	People we don't know & who know no one in the church. Need to make contact.	Let people know we have something to offer. Encourage people to make initial contact with us.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - website - sign - concert/exhibition - finding opportunities to connect with people we bump into
#2 In Touch	People who know at least one person in the church. Need an attractive group in which to belong.	Encourage people we know to become regular participants in a program or group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reception - responding to enquiries - funeral ministry - cultivating relationships with people in our work, school, social spheres
#3 Belonging	Know several people and are a regular part of a church group. Need an opportunity to find out more about Christian faith and a reason to consider commitment.	Cultivate relationships between believers and people who participate in a program or group. Share spiritual life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - playgroups - kids' clubs - sporting clubs - interest groups - book clubs - regular social gatherings
#4 Embracing The Gospel	Interested in knowing about Jesus. Need to hear the gospel and establish a relationship with God.	Create an environment where people can explore the gospel in a meaningful way. Ensure there are opportunities for people to make a response to the claims of Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alpha course - Christianity Explained - Catechuminate courses - Evangelistic Bible studies
#5 Following Jesus	In a process of learning, obeying & growing in faith. Need teaching, encouragement & accountability to support Christian life.	Teach, encourage & share accountability with people as they shape their life to be followers of Jesus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - life groups - cell groups - life transformation groups - Sunday school
#6 Serving In Ministry	Have identified gifts, skills & ministry, & are serving others in Jesus' name. Need opportunities and training to develop gifts.	Encourage & equip all people to exercise their gifts & talents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - training sessions - apprenticing arrangements - program team meetings
#7 Leading Ministry	Take up a leadership role. Need leadership mentoring.	Train & encourage people to be leaders in the church.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parish council - leadership community