

Sharing the Good News

Through word and action



Approaching the Topic

Have you ever had good news that you couldn't wait to share? Perhaps it was the announcement of your engagement, the arrival of your first child ('It's a girl'), or a difficult exam passed. Good news has that contagious effect. It can't stay within you. It just has to get out! And the more life-affecting the news, the stronger the desire to share it. The good news we have been given in Jesus is that we are deeply loved by God. This love allows us to look at the world through different eyes. We are freed from our own destructiveness and share in a new relationship with each other and the world – liberated and renewed! This is the message the Church seeks to embody in word and deed. This is what we mean when we refer to the mission of the Church.

How our mission began

When Jesus walked this earth he taught people, he worked miracles and healed the sick. But most of all he was a man of extraordinary love.

It was this quality that attracted so many to him, and which united even the most diverse of people. It was this love that catapulted his followers beyond their normal spheres of capability and challenged the wise, the rich and the worldly powerful to reassess their lives. In short, the world changed because this man gave his life in love and called others to do the same. Furthermore, followers of Jesus experienced his love as not merely a 'nice guy' sort of camaraderie, but the power of God at work, calling all people to be reconciled, to have faith, and to welcome God's presence as it became more and more evident in their lives. After his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, Jesus left them with a great commissioning:

Therefore, go and make disciples from all nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to fulfil all I have commanded you. I am with you always until the end of this world. (Matthew 28.19-29)

And so, from the Spirit-filled events of Jesus' life, the mission of the Christian Church was born. Like Jesus, his followers experienced that bursting energy of God's love within them. First and foremost this love spilled out to one another and led them to form communities. These communities reinforced a lifestyle that carried on the words and actions of Jesus. They cared for each other, preached the Gospel, worked miracles, healed the sick, reached out to the poor and the lonely, and extended the presence of Christ further into the world.

While these little Christian



communities and the works of compassion which developed from them were human endeavours, they were not built simply on human goodwill. They were born out of faith in the risen Christ, and therefore carried with them a definite message: 'Jesus is alive! Be reconciled and believe in the Good News! The kingdom of God is now among us!' In other words, a central message was being communicated through these Christian actions. It can be helpful to name these two dimensions underlying the mission of the Church: deeds and words, action and message, witness and proclamation.

Witness – we act like Christ

'What good is it to profess faith without showing works?', said the apostle James (James 2.17). His words remind Christians that their faith is not in some 'airy-fairy Jesus in the sky' but in the risen Christ enfolded in his people. The Gospel of Matthew also confronts us with some strong words about this. In Chapter 25, Jesus points out that whoever gives food to the hungry, or gives drink to the thirsty, welcomes a stranger, clothes the naked or visits those imprisoned is in fact responding to Christ himself. 'Truly I say to you: whenever you did this to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25.40)

True Christian witness must always

be accompanied by authentic actions which address the humanity of others. For all its flaws and limitations, no one can deny that the history of the Church – right up to the present day – reveals an impressive abundance of good works: education, hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, prison outreach, counselling services, welfare agencies, street ministries and overseas crisis appeals. Not only are such works funded and staffed by the people who make up the Church, but they would not be possible unless underpinned by an ethos of compassion and support practised daily in the families, households and parishes which are the building blocks of the Church community.

Proclamation – we tell others about Christ.

Christians believe that when the love of God is being lived authentically and openly, there is a deeply attractive quality about it. Indeed, in the first century of the Church's development, the Christian community grew at an extraordinary rate, despite the low level of organised missionary activity. The witness of the community's life was enough to attract people in droves. Today, witness through personal relationships is still the most influential factor in sharing the faith of our Church.

But as well as 'being' and 'doing' the Gospel message, our mission as Christians calls us to speak about our faith. Just as there is power in 'naming' the full reality of a situation, so too is there power in speaking the name of Jesus Christ as the source and motivation of our actions. This doesn't mean we have to talk about Jesus in every situation, but ultimately the aim of the Christian mission is to lead people to know Christ who is **already** operating in their lives. 'Proclaiming the Gospel' does not entail 'pushing religion', but rather sharing the values which are important to us and allowing people to make their own free decision as to how they respond.

An example of proclamation in the scriptures is the story of Pentecost, when the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, found themselves boldly preaching about Jesus Christ to the crowds in words which could be understood by many different nationalities (See chapter 2 of Acts). Through the centuries the Church has continued to speak the Word of God boldly and in myriad ways. For example, from each generation of Christians emerge its own charismatic individuals and groups (such as St Dominic and the religious order he founded), renowned for their commitment and flair for preaching the Gospel. Historically, the Sunday homily, Catholic schools and other educational institutes have also had a critical influence in the handing on of the Gospel message. Today, small groups of Christians coming together to reflect upon the scriptures is a feature of the renewal happening in our contemporary Church. The creative use of modern communications technology is a challenge which currently faces our Church as it strives to communicate the Gospel message within our media-oriented culture.

But most of all, the Gospel is proclaimed by Christians quietly going about their daily life. Whether it be the child's bed-time story, the woman who promises to pray for her neighbour's job interview, or the football player who makes the sign of the cross before his game – in all these ways Christians tell others about the beliefs which motivate their lives.

Of course, proclaiming the Gospel needn't always be verbal. Works of art, devotional objects, ritual gestures (perhaps as simple as a family saying grace at the dinner table) can all speak volumes to those who come in contact with them.

'Your Kingdom com...'

'Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven', Catholics pray in the Lord's Prayer (the 'Our Father'). These words remind us that pursuing the mission of Jesus is not simply about 'saving our souls' and 'getting to heaven', as if eternal life had nothing to do with the

A Story

word as we know it today. Rather, it is believing that the kingdom of God is **already** at work in the world. It is about co-operating with this extraordinary reality, even when opposing forces threaten its very existence.

The immediacy of God's love for the human condition was a daily reality for the early Christians. So radical was their Gospel way of living and loving that it soon came into conflict with the worldly authorities of their day – just as Jesus had. By simply going about life in a Christlike manner, the early Church discovered that, by its very nature, it challenged unjust structures and allied itself with the plight of the



poor and oppressed.

In our contemporary era, we can point to examples where Christian communities have challenged the status quo of society and the state. Consider the Catholics of Latin America who, through a groundswell of basic Christian communities, are discovering their power to confront the systems that render them poverty-stricken and voiceless. Consider the Catholic Christian influence in revolutions such as the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, the emergence of Solidarity in Poland, and the fall of the Iron Curtain in

The mission of the Church offers more than supportive relationships and good humanitarian works. Everything it does points of a deeper reality: the presence of Christ among us. We respond to others, not simply as 'concerned citizens' but as the body of Christ. There is a historically documented story from the days of the early Christian Church which beautifully illustrates this point...

Welfare or wellbeing?

The Roman Emperor Julian, a man known for his hatred of Christians, was furious.

More and more people were turning away from the Roman gods and joining that new religious sect who called themselves Christians – and all because this tiny group of radicals were providing a social security system that far outstripped anything the Roman Empire could match. I'm being made a fool of, Julian reasoned to himself.

He stared in disgust at the latest report from his informants:

'...they attracted people by their care for strangers, their reverence for the graves of their dead and their relentless concern for those taken prisoner. At their "Eucharistic" gathering they willingly share food and belongings with the poverty-stricken widows and orphans...'

'Their affection for their sick is exceeding...bordering on the ridiculous. Even those dying from the dreaded plague are tended day and night by members of their community without a thought as to the danger of infection. Sure enough, the deadly disease is passed on from one to another, yet nothing daunts their willingness to tend the sick...'

'Why, these impious Galileans are supporting not only their own

sick and poor, but ours as well! The Roman people are seeing that they lack aid from us...'

This was intolerable, thought the Emperor. Not to be out done, he devised a plan which, based on the observations of his informants, imitated in minute detail the Christian's social welfare system. The plan was elaborate, expensive and highly structured – the imitation perfect... or so he thought.

Within six months of implementation, it had clearly failed.

While it had successfully imitated all the externals, it had not accounted for the vital factor of brotherly and sisterly love that motivated the entire Christian support system. No centrally controlled bureaucracy, no decree from above, could substitute for the relentless and unconditional familial love found in the local Christian communities; an intimacy which was constantly being reborn of the inner conviction that Christ was present in their midst.

Their support system's ultimate source was not a welfare programme, but a relationship of love. Its prime location was not a social security office but the Eucharistic celebration of the communities assembled on the Lord's day.

(Based on the more scholarly account from *Jesus and Community* by Gerhard Lohfink, Fortress Press, 1984)

eastern Europe. Consider also the number of Catholic missionaries who have lost their lives at the hand of authoritarian regimes; people who **chose** to risk their lives and to forgo many material comforts in places like El Salvador and Somalia, when life would have been safer and far more comfortable back home. Faces like these are prophetic signs of the Gospel mission at work in the world.



Lest we think that mission only occurs in faraway lands and on TV screens, let us consider our own country, where the bishops recently conducted an enquiry into the distribution of wealth in Australia. 'Mind your own business and stick to spiritual matters', said many people in politics and in the business world. Consider also the many statements on issues such as pornography, bioethics and abortion, where Church leaders have defended the dignity of the human person and the protection of human life, often at the cost of its own popularity at the hands of biased media reports. Consider, too, those professionals in the media, politics, business and the medical profession, who are prepared to put their jobs and prestige on the line for the sake of a principle of justice and integrity.

Of course, much of the poverty and oppression in Australia lies hidden and unrecognised. We suffer the effects of a recession, but we don't usually see starving children in our streets. We pay the cost of western materialism with chronic loneliness and isolation, yet most people are too attached to their consumer habits to recognise their entrapment. The sufferings of Australia's indigenous peoples are gaining more attention in the public eye, but most Australians unwittingly live in their own little worlds and fail to see how their 'private' lifestyles contribute to systems that condemn 'marginalised' people to poverty, illiteracy and low self-esteem.

While on numerous fronts the

Church continues to respond with generosity and courage to the needs of the human family, there are still countless situations begging for the radical challenge of the Gospel message to be seen, heart and felt. Such is the reality of God's kingdom in the world today: the kingdom is **here** (we would be cutting the ground from under our feet to ignore the evidence of that reality), but it is **yet to come**. As followers of Jesus we yearn and pray and work towards the day when God's love and peace will completely envelop the earth.

Beyond the Church

Of course, the Church does not have a monopoly on mission. The kingdom of God embraces all creation. It is far bigger than the Church alone. While we understand our faith community as having a special commission to 'be Christ' to the world, we also recognise that signs of Christ's love are powerfully present outside the visible structures of the Church, although not named as such. Wherever non-Christian individuals and groups respond to their neighbour with unselfish love and self-sacrifice, we recognise Christ as the source of their actions. Where appropriate, and while respecting the integrity and beliefs of both parties, the Church is open to opportunities for collaborating with non-Christian endeavours to spread peace, justice and truth among the peoples of the world.

Your Story

Think ... Talk

How have you reached out to others and shared your love, ideas, possessions?

Who or what was the motivation for your actions?

How have you observed or been touched by the mission or service of another?

Pray ... Act

God of love, give me your heart. God of action, use my abilities. Help me to respond to others as you would respond to me. Amen.

- What particular issue in the world today stirs your heart?
- Talk this over with a good friend. Bring it to prayer.
- Plan a simple, constructive action to respond to this situation.
- Ask your friend to support you as you act.

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