

Come and See: Missiology and St Philip's O'Connor

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor — Parish Day of Reflection, 22 October 2022

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INTRODUCTION

I want to start our reflection on a text we know best; "Come and see." I think John's Gospel is a missiological story. So I am going to look at a few pointers from it to help us spark up our thinking.

COME AND SEE: PHIL'S LITTLE FIB

I have always had an unease about this slogan. I want to ask: 'Come and see what?' It's catchy, but there is no object for the verbs. Does it have something of the meaning of 'Come up and see my etchings?' Is Philip acting like a dodgy carnival spruiker?

He sounds more like a dodgy entrepreneur when he seeks out Nathaniel and says, 'We have found the answer to your problems; it's a guy out of Nazareth who ticks all the boxes.' Nathaniel guffaws, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Do you remember how John tells the story? 'Jesus found Philip and said to him "Follow me."' There is Philip's little fib. 'We have found . . . '.

There is much more status in being the centre of the story. 'I've got something on offer.' And Nathaniel's cynical response is a great critique. Here is the question in a modern form that some of my grandchildren put to me: 'Can anything good come out of a corrupt, arrogant church?'

Nathaniel humours Philip because it appears he has nothing better to do, but Jesus 'sees' him. For Nathaniel that changes everything, the revolution has begun. Nathaniel sees his new King, the Son, the incarnate Word.

What this story does is stop us putting ourselves and our actions at the centre of 'come and see.' Becoming carnival spruikers has bedevilled western Christian missiology and action for centuries but especially during the last one, whether in the form of denominationalism, sectarianism, colonialism, evangelicalism, Anglo-Catholicism, progressivism, conservatism, Christian nationalism or some other pernicious -ism.

John's storytelling makes humility the core virtue for mission.

The best way to live humility? Most people listen more willingly to people who appreciate them and are learning with them. "We want the church to ask the questions we are asking."

'Only the very brave . . . dare . . . to go back to the helpless silence of being learners and listeners.' — Ivan Illich.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3.16. Another little insight. For God so loved the world . . .

God focuses on the world, the whole creation, its material order and its social and political order. The world is good according to Genesis. At the heart of the world are human beings hearing elusive whispers of beauty, freedom, love, justice, and longing for truth, catching glimpses of them, and trying to capture them in politics and social life. Then those whispers and glimpses struggle to survive in a whirl of bombs, violence or the overwhelming stench of self-interest and unmitigated love of power and ideology.

It is the creation and the humans in that whirl of hope and despair whom God loves.

John's storytelling makes keeping your eyes on God's world our focus. 'We want the church to ask the questions we are asking.' — Young people to Pope Francis

GOD'S FOOLISHNESS: PART 1 — GOD LOVES THE WORLD

Everything begins with God. Three verbs help us here. God loves, gives, sends. Note they are *verbs* not characteristics.

The love comes as gift. The idea pervades John's Gospel as well as the rest of the New Testament. It makes God's approach to humans utterly vulnerable. John's gospel tells that story to its bitter end.

That gift is packaged in Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is sent in Jesus. If you want to know who God is then this is the package sent. When you open the package, it is not a hologram of God or a bunch of doctrinal ideas we can discuss around a BBQ. The Word encounters us and finds us. When God finds us God offers life, life that belongs in the age to come but lived here, creative life, life-giving life.

So that is the God we get in the package. God comes as personal, relational, his creative power packaged in giving love, served up in humanity and named Jesus of Nazareth located in time and space and vulnerable to death by violent power. And yet life wins out, generous overflowing life.

Discernment is the core driver of the church 's mission.

The core of God's mission is uncompromising generosity in Jesus that brings the life of the Creator into this world to bring the world to its beautiful freedom.

Love and know the world like God does.

GOD'S FOOLISHNESS: PART 2 — THOSE WHO BELIEVE, THE CHURCH

Then God does something more foolish and dangerous. There is this funny bunch who seriously trust this enough to put their life on the line—this is where the whispers and the glimpses find their reality.

These weirdos are still caught up in politics, economics, danger, and yet see something different. They don't want to escape it. They want to see it as God sees it and live in it as it was meant to be: eternal life.

Now these folk need to live out this life because we are where God's intention for human life and new creation becomes visible.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote, 'The only hermeneutic of the Gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe in it and live by it.' The church is the place where we are shaped, moulded and formed so that we share the generosity and graciousness of God in our relations with each other.

The core of the church's mission is to be a learning community formed to live well together.

GOD'S ONLY USEFUL TOOL: THE SPIRIT

We can take the view that Jesus has gone away and left us to ourselves. This is a major theme in John. Jesus responds with:

When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. John 16.13.

The Spirit of creation comes in Jesus and the disciples receive that self-same Spirit in faith and baptism as part of God's purpose to bring the whole of that creation to its glorious

fulfilment. The role of every baptised believer together with all the other baptised believers is to discern the Spirit.

That is what the essence of Christian spirituality is all about. Discernment is the developed habitual capacity to listen and hear the Spirit's guidance and we only learn that when we are a learning and discerning community.

'Mission is finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in.'—Rowan Williams

Mission is first a spirituality and then a strategy. Strategy cannot bear the burden of mission by itself.

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