A new Heart for Mission

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How do we really feel about wanting to be a missional and welcoming people?

I ask that because my experience suggests that if we honestly want an answer to the question

“How can we be more missional and attractive and effective in today’s culture?”

and what are the obstacles that stop us?

Then the problem in the end

* is not about finding fresh ideas
* or struggling with finance
* or needing resources
* or newer liturgies
* and better programmes
* and it’s not about better preachers

But as somebody put it,

‘The heart of the human problem

is the problem of the human heart’

And unless the heart of the Church is changed, then not only will little ever change in terms of missional focus, but the world’ll see straight through it and not be impressed.

One newspaper article put it like this:

“The world challenges the church. We don’t want to hear your talk about love. We want to see it happen in communities of love.

We don’t want to hear your words about joy. We want to see joyful people.

We want none of your talk of forgiveness. We want to see a community where forgiving, loving, accepting love is happening all the time and changing personal behaviour”.

And if they don’t see that, then what they do see is what this article calls “poor little, talkative Christianity”.

So really tonight I want to focus on half a dozen heart issues that need to be grappled with if we’re serious about being a missional church,

and these issues have come up time and time again in the congregations I’ve led, and the churches I’ve visited, and I guess they’re lurking there beneath the surface in some way in a gathering like this.

So No 1 here, we need ‘A new honesty’.

* And if in the U.K. for instance, a 1000 people a week have been leaving the church,
* and attendance has fallen to less than half the levels of the 1960s
* and 39% of our churches have no-one attending under the age of 11.
* If more Moslems now attend mosques than Anglicans attend church,
* and half of the population is now completely unchurched and never engaged with church,

then surely it’s time to apply the beatitude

 ‘Blessed are the meek’...

not least because a very good translation of that word is ‘Blessed are those who have a true view of themselves’, who can look at themselves honestly in other words and ask the hard questions.

But then how do we get to that truth in a positive and creative way?

David Watson was one of the great pioneers of Anglican renewal and mission in the 20th century, he came to Northern Ireland a few times and the Church here was very close to his heart, and he said this about our whole approach to the way we do mission at the local level.

He said ‘At least once a year, ruthless questions need to be asked in an attitude of prayer and submission to God about the whole pattern of our services, our meetings and organisations and buildings.

* Are they achieving anything today?
* Are they the best use of time and money today?
* Are they helping to build up the Body of Christ today?
* Are they assisting the church in Evangelism today?
* Are they God’s best plan for today?

Their value yesterday is not the important point. Christian work is constantly crippled by clinging to the blessings and traditions of the past. God is not the God of yesterday.  He is the God of today.

And then he writes this: “Heaven forbid that we should continue playing religious games in one corner when the cloud and fire of God’s presence have moved to another”.

When I first moved to St Marks Haydock on Merseyside as a young Rector, I was overwhelmed by the sense of ‘religious gamesmanship’,

and how it could entrap an entire church.

In fact, if you chose an abstract painting to describe what a church like this actually looks like in a missionally needy world, then how about this…BOX

But inside the box,

our church like many churches was

* Trapped in its lack of confidence
* Trapped in its lack of movement
* Trapped in its lack of trust
* Trapped in its lack of love for one another, and
* Trapped in its own pride

In fact they were gradually dying, and yet they still managed to be full of pride.

They were

1. Proud of their reputation and tradition

 Parish Profile – Jesus Christ = vicar

1. Proud of their preaching – Black Gown
2. Proud of having built the church with their own hands, or at least their grandparents had.

Easy in fact for any Christian community to be trapped in a box of its own making.

So then surely the very first priority in creating some genuine hope for our churches is actually to create some genuine space where we start to see ourselves as we really are,

and where we face up to the true picture before we embrace the new picture that God is wanting to give us.        And where are those spaces..?

Of course they come in our worship first of all,

but with the kind of humble integrity that leads and preaches, prays and confesses in a way that enables and empowers the congregation to really focus on the issues that need to be faced.

And then they need to spill out into our groups and ministries and vestry meetings as we begin to set a clear agenda for listening to God and getting a

“true view of ourselves” that gets us out of the box.

So let’s simply be honest first of all, about where we’re starting from, and where we need to get to.

And if we’re to do that, then secondly of course we need ‘A New Humility’..

that doesn’t try and make all the common excuses for never moving, and is genuinely prepared to make the missional changes needed, and that’ll sign on the line if you like and say OK … we do need to change, and we are going to change.

I wonder if you’ve ever tried to make a list of the excuses that churches do make for never changing – It’s quite a list.

Here’s a few of them, take your pick…

* We’ve always done it this way in this church.
* We’ve never done it that way in this church.
* I’m sure it’s not God’s will.
* You’ll upset /offend your mother /father / minister /children /friends / bishop…
* It’s too ambitious / soon / far / quick / new / different
* We’re too old / young / inexperienced /

set in our ways

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* It’ll cost too much
* It’s not professional enough.
* Folk will not understand / appreciate / support / listen /…
* We’ve tried that before.
* We haven’t the time /resources /people /gifts.
* We’re not ready for it yet.
* Interesting idea, but our church is different.
* All right in theory…can you put it into practice?
* It’s against our tradition /policy /doctrine.
* It needs more research /study /investigation.
* Somebody would have suggested it before if it were any good.
* Let’s discuss it at another time.
* You don’t understand our problem…
* We have too many things going on now.
* Let’s be practical.
* Let’s form a committee.
* Let’s shelve it for the time being.
* Let’s get back to reality.
* Who do you think you are?

I had a friend actually who said his Rector used to spend hours in his study looking out of the window, watching the local train go by.

And when he was asked why he did this, he said “It’s the only thing in the parish that moves without me having to push it!”

But then of course this vision for a truly mission shaped church really is something that our rectors cannot push on their own.

And very simply, if our churches are to move from a resistance to change to a culture that actually welcomes it, then in the words of Charles Simeon,

“There are 3 lessons that every minister must learn first of all:  humility, humility and humility”.

And at the heart of that humility I believe, is a far greater willingness for a truly shared ministry, an ‘every member ministry’.

where we break down the tasks and gifts and  responsibilities of missional leadership piece by piece, and distribute them widely..

One of the findings I love from the mass of research that’s been carried out into fresh expressions of church through the Church Army in ‘Anecdote to evidence’, is the overwhelming evidence of the releasing of leaders.

So much so that we’ve actually invented a whole new piece of jargon for what we now call the ‘lay lay’.

And the ‘lay lay’ are the people who carry no official church badge or central authorisation, but who are often leading the way in transforming the way we do mission, some of you here today probably.

And what is it that’s so special about the lay lay in God’s plan?

You know somebody took the translation of the word laity from the word “laos” and paraphrased part of the meaning with the phrase the ‘little people’.

In other words the ordinary, normal, humble little people who in a million little ways belong to and blend into the places they live and move in,

but in so doing they also have personal and often very powerful connections, as well as a real understanding of the contexts we’re trying to reach.

And maybe for those of us ordained or even licensed, we need at times more humility in allowing the ‘little people’, the lay lay, to lead us in terms of what works and what doesn’t work in terms of mission,

And perhaps in fact, it is the mobilisation of the little people that’ll lead to the large harvest in mission.

Let’s just take a case study for a moment, in the book of Acts - the first great missional movement outside of Jerusalem, in Antioch.

And Antioch was the first great missionary church.

* It was the first place they were called Christians
* It was the first great spiritual battleground for the gospel outside of Jerusalem
* And it was a huge city
* the capital of Syria
* and the third largest city in the world
  + Famous for its games and sport and huge building programmes
  + Notorious for immorality
  + It was multi racial, very wealthy, and a great centre for commerce
  + And because it was open to the whole world, it was overflowing with pagan and Eastern religion.

In other words, in mission terms, the odds were incredibly stacked against it.

So who was the mega, multi talented and anointed leader and apostle who planted that church?

Answer:  nobody knows,

but what we do know is that in practise, it was actually planted by the nameless, faceless, normal and ordinary little people, moving and living within the culture and context of that city,

released by the apostles to get on and plant a church – and what a church!

So what is it that stops us releasing the little people?

* What is it that makes us think we don’t have the people to release in the first place?
* That we don’t have the gifts and talent and anointing that’s critically needed in those we do have?
* And that we’re not sure we can trust them anyway?

You know one of the most crucial things I’ve learned about leadership in the Kingdom of God is that it’s ‘inside out’ and ‘upside down’.

Or as Neil Cole put it:

“God’s kingdom is counterintuitive.  It is the opposite of what we see as the norm. The problem is that we try to lead right side up in an upside down kingdom, and this leads to warped leadership”.

Let me remind you of a famous passage in 1 Cor 1: v26 – 28,

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,

Two sayings:

* ‘Jesus came only for failures’
* ‘God’s strength shows up best in

 weak people’

Apostle Paul’s example:

(multi talented academic leader)

* Went to great pains to share what he’d learned, that ‘God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong’ (1 Cor 1:27)
* Despite all his talent and intelligence, he said  
  ‘If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness’ (2 Cor 11:30)
* Dealing with others, he began with the principle:  
  ‘we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves’ (Rom 15:1)
* And he gloried in testifying of God’s specific word to him: ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9)

In other words, God delights in taking undervalued, unconfident and seemingly untalented people, and turning them into leaders…

But we often still weed out the weak when we think about leadership.

But then there’s another heart ingredient that can make it a whole lot easier to be humble, and that’s Hunger.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled’

Unlike the extra beatitude that says “Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed!”

But it’s the hunger that makes us long for and look for the missional possibilities.

One of the most exciting things about engaging with Fresh Expressions of church is that every project and every plant begins because there’s often a hunger from enthusiastic lay people, who really want to see a transformation in their own particular context.

And so a single person with a passion who’s well connected and well placed really can inject enormous energy and impetus into a missional vision,

if of course, there’s a vision and a hunger in others to see them released.

Now the early church obviously had the hunger and the vision, yet even there, their vision had to be widened by the Holy Spirit before they could see the whole picture of God’s plan.

Before Antioch of course, they only went to the Jews because they believed the Gospel was only for Jews.

And at first they had a narrow vision of God and his mission, as many churches do today..

Where we’ve seen God at work in our particular tradition, in our particular way, with a particular kind of leader, and we assume that’s how it’s always going to be done.

But of course however good things are or have been, and however right they may seem, God will always move on our thinking and move us on,

and ‘constant change is here to stay’.

And leading up to Antioch, change came very fast.

In Acts 8, they went to the Samaritans, when Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.

In Acts 9, they went and welcomed Saul of Tarsus, violent opponent of the Church, and God said ‘Go and welcome him’.

In Acts 10, Peter had to go to the house of Cornelius, Roman Officer, again unthinkable,

and Peter’s obviously embarrassed. In fact in v15-17 he’s effectively saying ‘Don’t blame me, it’s not my fault, God did it!’

And sometimes there’s a confusion in the Church because God in his sovereignty is doing all kinds of new things and touching all kinds of people in ways we don’t expect...

But we need to expect, and we need to tap in to the hunger that God is putting in his people for  missional reasons.

And then allow it to give birth to the new thing that God is obviously doing....

so A new Hunger, a new humility and a new honesty

Then moving on, another huge issue here is Harmony, because as somebody said,

“A divided world demands a united church”

And when it gets a taste of true community, it wants to be a part of it, simple as that.

But then when it sees a church divided, whether by doctrine, denomination, relationship or race, with over 9,000 denominations,

and it sees it tearing itself apart over secondary issues, unable to speak the truth in love on the difficult issues, then it walks away and doesn’t want to know, and who can blame it ?

People were walking away in droves from my church when I first went there. It was so divided in so many places.

Over the years there was a complete change of culture on the meaning and importance of community and quality of relationships.

And let’s just say in passing that changing the values and the very culture in a church is way more important than simply coming with a vision.

One of my favourite sayings is this one: that

            “Culture eats vision for breakfast”

In other words, what we really value will really prevail when it comes to what we prioritise.

2 sayings:

1. “We do what we value and value what we do”

2. “Never change a structure till you change the value first….Or the cost is always too high”

* So work on the values

long before the vision

* 5 years to change a church’s values.

Now back in Antioch, they would never have been able to take such a diverse city by storm if they hadn’t passionately shared the same values, and had a powerful unity in that.

But then once they did have that, they also needed a powerful combination of very diverse leaders.

And if you read the beginning of Acts 13, you see there an extraordinary mixture of leadership.

* Barnabus: a Jewish Cypriot, former property owner who sold most of it for the work in Acts 4.
* Simeon: he was an African
* Lucius: a converted Arab
* Manean: the foster brother of King Herod no less (very popular)
* Saul: the university scholar, and once rigid Pharisee who persecuted the church.

You couldn’t imagine 5 more different people leading the church. Or 5 more controversial people.

Or for that matter, 5 more appropriate people to reflect the multicultural diverse nature of that city.

So we need to ask: how appropriate are the missional leaders that we’re releasing for today?

And how far do they reflect the many different cultures in Irish society, even in your little patch?

And then how effectively are they working together for the kingdom of God, with the same values, in a mission shaped landscape?

Harmony is key, and it’s often very difficult, sometimes excruciatingly difficult, but it’s absolutely key.. because without it,

the culture will eat the vision for breakfast.

And that’s why a fifth issue for a missional church is what I’d call the Hurt principle.

And instead of the usual self centred, destructive kind of hurt, we really do have to embrace and nurture and continually teach the self giving and sacrificial kind, and remember the saying:

         “ That which costs us nothing,

            is worth precisely what it costs ”

And of course to move forward in mission and be genuinely “mission-shaped” will always be costly in some way,

because it’ll go on demanding that we keep on changing our church so we can keep on engaging with an ever changing culture.

And actually Sacrifice is the key word here.

The bible, of course, talks a lot about offerings and sacrifices, but there’s a key difference of course, because a sacrifice actually hurts.

Sacrifice is costly. And believe you me it is about sacrifice at every conceivable level.

It’s about sacrificing our focus on the safe and the familiar, and embracing a little godly risk.

Or sacrificing our favourite way of doing things, and the comforts of a ministry that always centres on me and my preferences.

It means sacrificing the comfort of thinking that we have all the answers,

and being willing to put ourselves in a place where yes there’ll be far more theological and liturgical and structural questioning for a while.

It means sacrificing our need to be strong, and embracing instead the strength of being vulnerable, and willing to step out in faith.

Or again, sacrificing our need for success,

and learning to accept that we do actually learn by our mistakes as well, and a measure of failure and weakness and uncertainty and even fear.

And for all of us, it means sacrificing our control,

whether it’s the security of our role and position in the church as the only one who can preside and minister and make decisions.

Or the demands we make on our clergy to be all things for all people and carry all the load of ministry….And the list goes on...

But as King David once said:

How can I offer to the Lord                                                                       that which costs me nothing ?

That which costs us nothing, is worth precisely what it costs:  spiritual law.

So the question in the end is what sacrifices are you and I and our congregations and our elected leaders prepared to make,

in order to become truly mission shaped?

So 5 very challenging issues there,

Which is why No. 6 is really vital too

And if we’re to be honest, humble, hungry, in harmony, and embracing a little godly hurt, then we need as well to covet a Heart of Hope.

And it’s ‘those who hope in the Lord’, says Isaiah, who’ll ‘renew their strength.  They will rise on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint’.

And of course the challenge of mission can be and often is completely exhausting, let’s be honest, but if it’s done in the power of God, then it’s also energising and renewing.

And the prophet Isaiah there gives a wonderful picture of the power of hope as he imagines this eagle spreading and locking its wings into that updraft of air, as it rises higher and higher into the sky with the wind,

where its vision is then transformed, quite literally, to see the whole landscape from a completely different point of view.

So can we believe that God wants to fill our hearts with a hope that transforms our vision,

and then enables us to see way above and way beyond our expectations..

David Livingstone was envisioned and called to Africa when he listened to another missionary speaking about the land.

And he spoke about “a vast plain to the north where I’ve sometimes seen the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been”

And if you ever go to Africa you’ll see that the landscapes there are awesome.

This missionary had looked on the horizon and seen the smoke of 1000 villages…

* A thousand thriving communities
* With 10s of 1000s of opportunities
* And his eyes and his heart were opened.

Hudson Taylor:

          “There are 3 stages in any work for God;

                   impossible, difficult, done”

* Dreams      - out of our minds
* Visions       - out of the boat
* Goals          - out of our rut

Now that systematic planning and praying on those 3 levels has been a real help and encouragement to me over the years

But it does start with the dreams, and the dreams can only come out of a heart of hope.

And you see when you get that kind of heart from God, then the challenge to be missional is actually turned into a vision for transformation...

... fuelled by the power of Hope!

* And that’s why we need to re-imagine mission
* And why we need to reshape the church to make it happen.
* And why we need to change and become like little children in the process, and be the little people God intended
* But then before anything, it’s also why we need

to seriously engage with these core issues, that are all ultimately heart issues,

about how we go about embracing this call to be a missional people in our day.