

JESUS AND HIS MISSION New Testament Perspectives

The person of Jesus is found at the center of Christian mission. Recent Popes have spoken eloquently about Jesus and evangelization. Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* noted: “Jesus himself, the Good News of God, was the very first and the greatest evangelizer; he was so through and through: to perfection and to the point of the sacrifice of his earthly life” (EN 7). In his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II asserts that Jesus is “at the center of God’s plan of salvation” (RM 6) and that “the Church cannot fail to proclaim that Jesus came to reveal the face of God and to merit salvation for all humankind by his Cross and Resurrection” (RM 11).

Pope Francis speaks eloquently of Jesus in his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.... Whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.... With a tenderness which never disappoints..., he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus; let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!” (EG 3).

In his message for World Mission Sunday 2017, Francis writes: “Let us never forget that ‘being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’ (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1). The Gospel is a Person who continually offers himself and constantly invites those who receive him with humble and religious faith to share his life by an effective participation in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection.... The world vitally needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the Church, Christ continues his mission as the Good Samaritan, caring for the bleeding wounds of humanity, and as Good Shepherd, constantly seeking out those who wander along winding paths that lead nowhere” (4-5).

For a deeper and more profound understanding of Jesus and his mission, this presentation chooses (from a wide variety of possible valid avenues) to present five themes found in the life and teachings of Jesus which provide insight into Jesus’ “mission message.” These same five themes portray Jesus as a “model of mission” as he moved about Palestine in the company of his disciples and faithful followers. In addition, these insights will hopefully inspire us to reflect and manifest in our lives the person of Jesus, who is *the message and model of mission!*

Jesus’ Mission Commands. The Church has traditionally highlighted the mandates of Jesus to his disciples to engage in mission; in response, over the centuries thousands of dedicated Christians have given their lives to spread the Gospel—both in their home countries as well as in far-flung areas of the world. Interestingly, the “mission commands” appear in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles as words of the risen Lord. They can be conveniently listed: Mk 16:16; Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21; and, Acts 1:8. Two brief examples are provided: “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation” (Mk 16:16). “As the Father sent me, so am I sending you” (Jn 20:21). Of course, probably the most frequently quoted passage is the

“great commission” found in Mt 28:18-20. Each one of these five passages can serve as a basis for a profound discussion, a sharing of insights, as well as a personal invitation to engage in mission.

The consciousness of Jesus’ disciples was radically transformed by the experience of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Then, in the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they were provided with the power to make their witnessing effective. These weak and timid men became courageous and fearless proclaimers of the crucified-risen Lord. They witnessed to Christ through selfless service, missionary journeys, and the proclamation of the Gospel. One may validly assert that they received the “true missionary charism” through the anointing of the Spirit. They now perceive that their mission is to go beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles, always witnessing to Christ until his final return at the Parousia. With the assurance of the Lord, “I am with you always until the end of time” (Mt 28:20), they boldly engage in mission. The Holy Spirit manifests the Spirit of the Risen Lord; mission becomes the work of the glorified Christ.

In their mission approaches the disciples recall Jesus’ own mission vocation (Lk 4:18-19) and how Jesus went about his mission during his earthly life. As Matthew notes, “He went around the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people” (Mt 4:23); thus, the disciples imitate Jesus in teaching, preaching, and healing. As Jesus proclaimed the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), missionary disciples become persons of the Beatitudes (cf. RM 91). As Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love, the disciples become persons of charity and signs of “God’s love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality”; they serve as a “universal brother” to all those in need (RM 89). They seek to imitate the *kenosis* (Phil 2:5-11) of Jesus (self-emptying love). They embrace hardships and suffering, because they realize that “mission follows this same path and always leads to the foot of the cross” (RM 88). Indeed, it is an understatement to affirm: As Christians we follow no other “model of mission” than Jesus himself!

Mission as Discipleship. One can identify *ten aspects* of “discipleship” that provide insight into becoming an authentic missionary. ► The disciple is **called by Jesus**; this is seen in all the Gospels (e.g. Mk 1:16-20, Lk 5:1-11). It is a reversal of the rabbinical custom in the time of Jesus (where the disciple chose his teacher). It comes from God’s initiative; we do not do the choosing (Jn 15:16: “I chose you”). A faith response to God’s choice is expected of the disciple. ► Indeed, this is **a personal invitation**. Jesus’ followers are called by name; we are not anonymous; specific names are given in the New Testament (e.g. Jn 1:35-51; Mk 3:13-19; Mt 4:18-22; Lk 5:1-11). Like Jesus’ first disciples, our unique person is to be put at the service of the Gospel.

Discipleship implies ► **a continuous relationship**, becoming “constant companions” of Jesus. A deep friendship develops (Jn 15:14-15; 15:4-8; 15:13). The disciple shares the daily life of Jesus as he reaches out to the little, least, lost, lonely, and last. Discipleship requires ► **being a listener and learner**. Disciple comes from the word *discens*, to listen and learn. Thus, a disciple imbibes the teachings and approach of Jesus, constantly reaching out and crossing boundaries, in what can be termed a “barrier-breaking” ministry. Jesus often manifested his solidarity through “table-fellowship,” sharing friendship through meals taken together.

The Gospels reveal ► **the ordinariness of the disciples**. Jesus chooses ordinary persons in various roles (Matthew the tax collector; Peter the fisherman; Luke the doctor). “Ordinary” also means *not* being perfect (lacking faith, being blind, seeking honors, being weak and sinful); this is illustrated well in Mt 20:20-28. And yet, these diverse disciples are ► **called to form community**. They are to be together, cooperate, live together; very different personalities are to be integrated into one community: e.g. Simon the Zealot along with Matthew, the tax-collector and Roman collaborator.

Discipleship demands ► **respecting Jesus as master**, following his example. The basic norm or criterion of all authentic love is Jesus’ command to love “*AS I*,” as Jesus loved. Jesus gives us a new commandment (Jn 13:34; 15:12). His love is seen in action in the foot-washing (Jn 13:1-16). Disciples will ► **share Jesus’ mission**. Disciples become apostles (*apostolein*); they are “sent” to preach, heal, comfort, and pray as Jesus did. Note the “disciple-apostle” dynamic; reflection and action are integrated. This is possible through Jesus’ gift of the Spirit (Jn 20:21-22).

Undoubtedly, discipleship implies ► **sharing the Cross of Jesus**. One follows Jesus in all circumstances (e.g. Mt 10:38-39; 16:24-26; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23-26 [adds “daily”]; Lk 14:27). “Follow me” implies the cross. The cross *always* shocks, scandalizes, and challenges us. Mission is often accomplished in vulnerability (2 Cor 12:7-10). A disciple is deeply aware that he is ► **a rehabilitated sinner**. Jesus’ disciples are not perfect; they fail their master. Yet, after the resurrection, Jesus speaks of peace and reconciliation, and this profound experience is committed to the Church’s memory. Many great saints spoke of their personal sinfulness as well as their profound awareness of God’s love and mercy. Truly, one can validly conclude that these ten characteristics reveal our own identity as Jesus’ missionary disciples (cf. EG 119-121).

The Kingdom of God. The word “Kingdom” (*Basileia*) appears nearly one hundred times in the Gospels; it is the central image in Jesus’ preaching. Jesus never defined the Kingdom; however, he used many parables to describe it. Yet, a simple description can prove useful: the Kingdom of God (or in Matthew, the Kingdom of heaven), promised to Israel and proclaimed by Jesus, is God’s ultimate victory over all the enemies of human life—over sin, evil, injustice, oppression, suffering, and even death itself. The Kingdom is the rule of God’s Word in human history; it is humanity’s entrance into a new heaven and a new earth. This Kingdom demands new attitudes in life and renewed relationships with others. The Preface for the Feast of Christ the King, describes the Kingdom as “an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace.” Promoting this kingdom is, in brief, a succinct description of the Church’s mission here on earth.

In the New Testament use of this symbol, one should *not* think of the Kingdom as a physical place; rather, it is God’s rule in our lives—both personal and social. Where is the Kingdom? Wherever God rules and Kingdom values (peace, joy, fraternity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, love, etc.) are present, there one finds the Kingdom. The Kingdom is, in fact, a “new order” where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged and made visible and concrete. One may ask: Has God’s Kingdom arrived? The answer comes in two affirmations: yes, where God and his Kingdom values are present, the Kingdom is being realized; however, the total fulfillment of the

Kingdom has not yet come; it will only fully arrive at the second coming of Christ, at the *Parousia*. Thus, Christians continually pray: “Your Kingdom come; Your will be done” (Mt 6:10).

Jesus’ proclamation of God’s Kingdom provides the Church with a clear “mission agenda.” Simply stated, the Church is to be an instrument for the realization of God’s rule; her many works are to give concrete witness to the centrality of God’s reign and values both in the human heart and within the wider society. A fine example of “living Kingdom values” is readily seen in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, canonized on September 4, 2016. On that occasion, Pope Francis noted: “Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available to everyone through her welcome and defense of human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded. She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity.” One may validly affirm: Mother Teresa authentically manifested the coming of God’s Kingdom into this world!

Pope John Paul II in his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* devoted an entire chapter to the Kingdom of God (RM 12-20); his insights are many. “Jesus makes clear his messianic calling: he goes about Galilee preaching the Gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel’ (Mk 1:14-15; cf. Mt. 4:17; Lk 4:43)” (RM 13). “The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another” (RM 15). “Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it” (RM 15).

God as Merciful Father. A truly beautiful description of God in the New Testament is that God is “rich in mercy,” *dives in misericordia* (Eph 2:4). Indeed, in numerous biblical passages, Jesus reveals to us the very face of God, who is truly a loving Father, none other than Jesus’ own Father. “The Father and I are one” (Jn 10:30). “I came from the Father and have come into the world” (Jn 16:28), “not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (Jn 6:38). “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (Jn 15:10). “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

The Gospels consistently speak of Jesus’ loving relationship with his Father. Frequently, Jesus would retire to a quiet place to be in prayer to his Father (Mk 1:35; 6:46; Lk 5:16; 6:12; 11:1). In fact, the disciples, observing Jesus’ prayer habits, request him to teach them how to pray; Jesus responds with teaching the beautiful “Our Father” (Lk 11:1-4). It is also most noteworthy that Jesus calls upon his loving Father in the “crisis moments” of his life in Gethsemane and on Calvary. “My Father, if this cup cannot pass by without my drinking it, your will be done” (Mt 26:42). “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46).

These scripture references indicate that Jesus was conscious of his unique relationship to the Father; certainly, they reveal the very identity of Jesus: Son of the Father. Furthermore, Jesus enables us to have a deep love-relationship with the Father: “As the Father has loved me,

so I have loved you; remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). In fact, the early Church continues teaching that through Baptism, we are in a love-relationship with *Abba* our Father (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). John expresses it this way: “Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God’s children; for that is what we are” (1 Jn 3:1). Empowered by the transforming love of Father, Son, and Spirit, we engage in mission, telling the entire world of God’s love!

Centrality of Love in Christian Life. Jesus’ transforming teaching clearly includes a new and profound emphasis on the role of love in human life. While the Old Testament had insisted on the love of God and love of neighbor (Deut 6:4-5; Lev 19:18), the Jewish view was that one’s neighbor was one’s fellow Jew. Jesus does not abrogate the validity of the Old Testament; he announces a new perspective in fulfilling those commands. Explicitly, he says: “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). Jesus extends his commandment of love to include everyone—even one’s enemies: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way your will be children of your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:44-45). Indeed, unconditional love of God and neighbor is the greatest commandment of all (cf. Mt 22:34-40); it is, in fact, a mission for all Christians!

Pope Francis expresses Jesus’ command to love through the optic of mercy; he insists that *mercy is God’s identity card*. The title of Francis’ first book as pope is: *The Name of God is Mercy* (2016). Pope Francis declared 2015 as a “Year of Mercy,” and he wrote the inspiring document *Misericordiae Vultus (The Face of Mercy)*. Francis writes that Jesus’ entire life and “his person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously.... The signs he works, especially in the face of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion” (MV 8). His mercy overflows when he invites Matthew the tax collector to follow him; he looked at Matthew with merciful love and chose him: *miserando atque eligendo* [Francis’ episcopal motto] (Mt 9:9). Jesus spoke many parables devoted to merciful love: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (Lk 15:4-7, 8-10, 11-32).

Francis continues: “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life” (MV 10). “The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel.... Wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy” (MV 12). On the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in 2014, as he ordained thirteen new priests he told them: “For the love of Jesus Christ, *never tire of being merciful!*” Speaking of Mary, Francis writes: “My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy.... No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh.... She treasured divine mercy in her heart” (MV 24). Finally, for the Philippine context, let us fondly recall that the theme of Pope Francis’ January 2015 Philippine visit was: *mercy and compassion*.

Reflection Questions: Why is an encounter with the person of Jesus foundational for all mission? Are the “mission commands” of Jesus still relevant today? Explain how they apply in contemporary times. What is your understanding of “missionary discipleship”? Highlight the core teachings of Jesus about God as our Father and the central role of love in Christian life and mission.

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