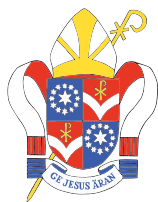




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Become disciples and change the world

A letter about mission by Bishop Åke Bonnier, Skara



Dear parishioners

As I write this letter, no vaccine against Covid-19 has been launched in Sweden but by the time you read this maybe, hopefully, the situation will be different. This has been a time of reflection for us Christians, for us to think in concrete terms about what it is like to live as a Christian and with the Christian faith in a society affected by the pandemic, what it is like to live in a “post-corona” world. We often say actions speak louder than words. So what does that mean to a Christian? St Francis of Assisi once said, “Always spread the Gospel. If necessary, use words.”

This letter is about mission. The Church, you and I, are called to mission. When I look back at the history of mission it has to a large extent been characterised by the thought that the Christians are right and everyone else is wrong. Today I tend to think, *Just because I am right does not mean you are wrong*. So with that perspective in mind, what does that mean for mission and what is the role of the Church in spreading the gospel?

Therefore go! About a church in mission

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

There are probably many of us who recognise these words in the Great Commission. We hear them every time someone is baptised in church. In our baptism, we were given a task, to spread God's peace and love in the world. The purpose of baptism and the creation calling for disciples is founded in God's love for us. God wants us to feel loved and wants us to live in peace with one another. There is so much that weighs upon us in our daily lives and sometimes it is not so easy to be a human being. That is why we need each other. That is why God needs us, to spread love, faith in for the future and hope. We need hope that can carry us that bit further when we no longer have the strength. We need the confidence that gives us the strength to take another step when everything else fails and betrays us. The love that allows us to live in peace with one another and with ourselves, as we are. And the wonderful promise that God has put down in his hope for us. *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

We are not alone. That promise is the backdrop to the Great Commission. It is God's mission, not ours. It is with God's strength that we go out. We do not need to have the strength ourselves to do it alone. It is for God's sake, for God's peace, and so that God's love may spread in the world, that we go out.

It is true that the history of mission has been controversial, characterised by abuse and violations, but I would say that the word “mission” is one of the most beautiful words. Mission, which is of Latin origin, means to “send with a task”. Somebody has put their faith in us and needs us for a task, to extend grace, to offer amends, to give freedom to all mankind. God needs you and me for his deeds on earth. It is an awe-inspiring thought.





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With our help, God wants to heal what is broken on earth, in creation and among people. That is the Great Commission summarised. The act can be small and simple and at the same time vast and comprehensive. To go out, as the Great Commission demands, could mean keeping your neighbour company in a lonely and difficult time. Or it could mean shopping for food for someone unable to do so themselves. It could be recycling, as a contribution to the planet. It could be standing up for a recently arrived refugee's right to a decent life here or elsewhere. It could be showing respect and curiosity while talking to people of another faith about God. It could be about supporting individuals and organisations which spread hope and faith in the future across the world. It could be inviting people into mass where faith is shared. Spreading God's love and peace is something that can be done in everyday activities, in the most solemn situations, as well as in large international contexts

On Earth as in Heaven

God's mission stands alongside God's Kingdom. There is the hope that things will be, (as we pray) "on earth as it is in heaven". When Jesus speaks about God's Kingdom, in the parable about the dough (Luke 13:21), the mustard seed (Luke 13:19), the salt (Matthew 5:13) or the lamp under a bushel (Mark 4:21), he is above all giving us his confidence. Confidence in a future about which we know nothing, sowing for a harvest which we may never experience and a confidence in ourselves – that we are chosen, not for our perfection or greatness but

because God needs us, as we are, even with our hurts. In the words usually attributed to the Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila, *Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good.*

Both the dough and the mustard seed contain messages about time and patience. The little things that we do are maybe not perceived as having any importance but in the end everything will be leavened. In the end we see the largest of all trees grow (out of the smallest of all seeds). The sourdough parable is about our responsibility as creators. We must knead and work the yeast into the dough, and then we must wait. Not all the work is ours. We are co-creators.

The parable of the salt says something about sharpness and courage, about standing up and raising one's voice so that the message of peace and justice for all mankind becomes clear in all situations in which we move. To be salt, as Jesus calls on us to be, is to ensure that Jesus's message is not watered down, so that the salt does not lose its flavour. To convert our faith into action, to be salt, is about the openness and generosity displayed when we speak clearly about Jesus and at the same time let people of other faith speak about their love of God.

In the parable of the lamp that must not be hidden behind a bushel, I think about how mission, self image and pride fit together. We need to let stories other than the one of a church in crisis, come to light. As a church, as parishioners, as employees, co-workers, organization, volunteers, visitors and worshippers we have incredible potential and amazing possibilities.



Picture: Shutterstock

We shall, as Jesus calls on us to do, let our light shine so it becomes clear why we are a church, why we are Christian, what we do, what we believe in and what we are capable of doing. Not because we want to demonstrate our own excellence but because we want to shine a light on God's plan for us and with the world. We need neither go elsewhere nor be anyone else in order to carry out God's mission. We need only "dig where we stand", in our own soil, in our own lives. The more we become the persons we were meant to be, the closer we get to God and to each other and the better we allow our own light to shine.

Mission is not primarily about conversion or about "gaining as many converts as possible for Jesus" even if that sometimes has been the case in the history of mission. **To go out and turn people into disciples has always started with being a disciple oneself, first and foremost.** It is by working together with the rest of the world that we can heal the world.

A young woman, Adi Mariana Waqas, from the Fiji Islands, spoke at the large Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Tanzania in 2018. She had some wise words about being a disciple of Jesus:

As an Indigenous person, I cannot help carrying in my being and bringing along with me the pain and cry of mother earth which is God's precious creation. That is to say that the groaning of creation is with us, here - prompting us to remember that as disciples of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are bearers of God's Good News for all longing for all who long for justice, healing, and reconciliation. Our great task is to be Jesus's disciples so as to change the whole world together.

I can only agree with her words. *Our great task is to be Jesus's disciples, changing and healing the world together.*

Dear Parishioners, be proud of what you do and what you are, in small as well as in great things. Continue to dig where you stand. Continue to support and encourage each other. Continue to work for justice, liberation, restoration and reconciliation. Continue to pray. Together we can change the world so that you might get a sense of heaven on earth. And remember: He is with us always, to the very end of the age.



Discussion points:

1. What do you think about when you hear the word mission?
2. How can you live the role of the disciple in your personal context?
3. What would you like to share concerning your faith?
4. In what way can others' faith enrich your own?

Further reading:

"Trust, listen, live - discussion thoughts along the way"
("Lita, lyssna, leva - samtalstankar längs vägen")

Åke Bonnier, Verbum 2020

I wish you God's rich blessing in the task of being a part of God's mission.

Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT



"Together we can change the world so that you might get a sense of heaven on earth!"