

Beloved

Marks of Mission, Marks of Love

Br. Mark Brown, SSJE

EVERYTHING GOD DOES IS “MISSION”: The creation of space and time and the elementary components of the universe, living things, human beings, a moral and ethical realm encompassing all creation; sending the Son as teacher, healer, redeemer, savior, and lover of those created in God’s own image and likeness; gathering and inspiring a people, a Church, to carry on the work of creation, re-creation, and mission.

One Church within the Universal Church, the Anglican Communion, has embarked on a now decades-long conversation about God’s mission and the Church’s role in it. So far, five “marks” or signs of the Church’s participation in the mission of God have been identified:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Pastors, teachers, theologians, missionaries, historians, and other scholars have offered their various perspectives on these signs of God’s mission. But what might monastics and contemplatives have to contribute to the broader conversation? Perhaps the reminder that any “Marks of Mission” begin in lives marked by God’s love.

The Baptism of Jesus

We begin with Jesus, the very embodiment of mission, and how he is depicted in scripture. All four gospels record his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each contain, with some slight variation, a voice from heaven saying, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*” (Mark 1:11). In each gospel this happens *before* the ministry of Jesus. No gospel says, “Good work, my Son – *now* you are my Beloved!” or “You are my Beloved Son – *now* get to work!” Jesus’ being beloved of God does not depend on his having accomplished anything. And there are no orders to get to work in order to justify or earn this status. Jesus does indeed come to a sense of mission, but only after absorbing the

reality of God's love for him and in him. His forty days of retreat into the Judean wilderness were, apparently, this time of absorbing the truth of this love and resisting the temptations to deny it. Jesus does begin his mission, but only after this transformative experience of coming to a new understanding of himself and the presence and working of the Divine Love within him.

The words spoken to the Beloved Son at the Jordan River are spoken to us individually: We are God's beloved sons and daughters, with whom God is well pleased (1 John 3:1). Our being beloved of God has not been conditional, either on what we've already accomplished, or on what we might do in the future. It simply is. We are invited to explore, to absorb, to embrace, and to rejoice in the truth of who we are as beloved children of God.

The words spoken to Jesus at the Jordan River are also spoken to the Church, which is, in one sense, his Risen Body. The Church is one manifestation of the Risen Body of Christ into which we are gathered. We are the flesh and blood of this new Incarnation, this new Resurrection. And we, together, are beloved of God, as Jesus himself was and is. And our being beloved is not conditional upon what we as the Church, as the Body of Christ, have already accomplished or might accomplish in the future.

Kisses

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out..."

So begins the "Song of Songs," one of the shortest but most resonant books of the Bible. We might wonder how well Jesus, an observant Jew, knew this extraordinary poetry. It is Jewish tradition today to read it at Passover and in some communities each Friday before the Sabbath begins. We might wonder what role it played in helping him come to a fuller understanding of his being beloved of God. Although one of the briefest books in Scripture, it has inspired more commentary from writers in the contemplative tradition than any other part of the Bible. It was far and away the favorite of medieval monastics and contemplatives: Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) wrote eighty-six sermons on the first few verses alone.

The Song of Songs is unique in Scripture for its unabashed sensuality. It is an uninhibited celebration of the love of a couple who sing their delight in each other's beauty. Over the course of the centuries, many have read this book as an allegory or metaphor or parable of the love of God both for the individual human being and for God's people, whether it be Israel or the Church or humanity in general. Some modern commentators have resisted this approach, preferring to see it simply as a love song between two human beings. But, why not both?

One thing that is striking about the Song of Songs is the mutuality, the reciprocity of love between the young man and the young woman – this in the context of a very patriarchal society and very hierarchical understanding of God (who is not mentioned in the book, incidentally). The partners share a mutual desire for the other, a reciprocal joy in the other, and in a surprisingly egalitarian way for the time in which it was written. To what extent the “Song” was known to Jesus and shaped his self-understanding, we don’t know; but it has deeply informed the understanding of God and the self-understanding of monastics and contemplatives for many centuries.

The first impulses of Jesus’ mission begin, in a sense, at the Jordan River, with the declaration of God’s love for and delight in Christ in his humanity: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* We come full circle near the end of the Gospel of John, where we read about a very poignant encounter between Peter and the Risen Christ. Jesus asks him three times, *“Do you love me?”* He might rather have asked three times – once for each denial *“before the cock crows”* (John 13:38) – *“Are you sorry for denying me three times?”* Instead, Jesus simply wants to know that Peter does love him and wants Peter to have the opportunity to say so, which he does. Jesus has already demonstrated his great love for the whole world – but now his desire is for this love to be reciprocated, to be mutual, to be expressed. Thus the Gospel of John, which begins with a majestic Prologue with a cosmic sweep, comes to a tender and intimate conclusion in this very human and emotional scene. The Lord – the Living Word of God through whom all things came to be, who became flesh in Jesus Christ, having demonstrated his great love – asks for the assurance of love from a mere human being. Peter answers, *“...you know that I love you”* (John 21:17). The circle is complete. And, so, Peter begins his own extraordinary embodiment of mission, which also ends on a cross.

God, it would seem, delights in the reciprocity, the mutuality of love. This is to draw us more deeply into God’s very essence, God’s own being and nature. When God the Father says to the Son, to us, and to the whole Church, *“You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased,”* we are invited into a relationship of mutual desire, mutual affection, and reciprocal love. Let us rejoice in it!

So, before we say, *“Here I am, send me!”* (Isaiah 6:8), we need to delight in and rejoice in the love of God for us and our love for God. We need simply to be the beloved with whom God is well pleased and to return God’s love. We might imagine God saying to us, *“Your plans sound wonderful – but first, just let me kiss you!”*

The Church

The first and primary “reason” (does God need reasons?) for the existence of the Church is simply to be the Risen Body of the Beloved, or the Beloved Risen Body of Christ – to the glory of God! It is to be the beloved people of God who return God’s love offered to them in Jesus Christ and in the whole of creation, and rejoice in it.

Knowing this truth, naming this truth, embracing this truth, gathering as the Church to worship, praise, and love the Giver of this truth, is a mark of God's mission, the first and primary mark of God's mission, the first and primary sign of God's love in action in the world. Wherever and whenever we individually or as the gathered Church know, name, embrace, and rejoice in the life of the Beloved Risen Christ, God's mission is being fulfilled, God's love is in action.

Jesus, having discovered and embraced his identity as Beloved of God following his baptism – and in the power of the Spirit of the Lord that was upon him (Luke 4:18) – began doing things. The sick, the lame, the blind, and the deaf were healed. Lepers were cleansed, sins forgiven, lessons imparted, the hungry fed, good news brought to the poor, a Kingdom proclaimed, the dead raised. Love was made manifest in action. A world was redeemed by the shedding of his blood. The things that Jesus did in the power of the Spirit flowed from the divine energies imparted to him by God's Spirit. What he did was an embodiment of God's mission in this world. And all this active ministry began at the Jordan River, with that voice from heaven: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

All that Jesus did in the power of the Spirit were signs, or "marks," of God's mission. Or, we might say, signs or marks of God's love, God's love in action.

Our Jordan River Experience

Something new begins at a river for us as well, figuratively speaking. Whether it is before, during, or after our actual baptism I don't think really matters – and I don't think we can control the time or manner of God's love working in the world. But there does come a time when we somehow know that we are beloved of God; that God's love is not only for us, but within us. To use another water image from the Gospel of John, we become aware of that *"spring of water gushing up to eternal life"* within us (John 4:14). This "spring of water" that Christ gives us is the Living Water, the River of the Water of Life, flowing from the throne of God (Rev. 21:6; 22:1). God's own Spirit and Life are imparted to us.

When we know and embrace this love, this spirit, this life, this living spring within us, when we begin to reciprocate God's tender love for us – even in our own limited and imperfect way – God's love begins to become God's love in action. We, too, begin to embody the mission of God. It is the Spirit not only *dwelling* within, but *working* within us that is the impulse to act in God's name and in God's power. Something new begins for us at the Jordan River, or whatever is the equivalent in our lives: something new that is caught up into the mission of God.

Saint Paul is thinking somewhat along these lines in the letter to the Ephesians. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good"*

works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8-10). What he seems to be saying is that we are indeed made for good works, but it is not the good works that earn our salvation or God’s love – these are offered “by grace,” that is, as an absolutely free gift. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the Spirit of God working in and through us, giving each gifts for building up the Body of Christ and in service to others (Romans 12:4-8).

What the monastic and contemplative tradition can offer the larger conversation around the “Five Marks of Mission” is a reminder, a drawing attention to the primary focus on the Source of all good works, all mission, everything done in God’s name. Mission in the name of Christ begins with love, adoration, worship, and praise of Christ himself, who is not an impersonal “force” working in us, but God’s own self, God’s Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, our Risen and Ascended Lord, who has declared his love for us. The first and primary sign or mark of God’s mission – the first and primary mark of God’s love in action in the world – is this worship.

True Confession

But, then what? Having been drawn into loving relationship with the Living God and worshipping the One who is the Source of all being and the Source of all love, what is the next step in undertaking mission in God’s name and in God’s power? There is a spiritual practice that I think is not only very helpful, but very necessary before we go further.

It’s an exercise familiar to many, but with a twist. Sometimes in hearing a confession or in leading a retreat I ask people to do something that nearly always results in head-scratching, sometimes even resistance. I suggest doing a kind of *examen*, that is, a review of conscience, or consciousness, a spiritual practice from the Ignatian tradition. When we do this in preparing for confession, what we usually do is make a list of our sins. That we sin is, of course, true. But it is only part of the truth about us. If we were to confess the whole truth, we would have to say more. We would also need to acknowledge or “confess” the ways in which God’s love has indeed been active in and through us. So I will ask people to confess their goodness to others, their kindness and generosity, to confess the ways in which God’s love has been manifest in and through them. It’s looking through the other end of the metaphorical telescope.

Most people are either reluctant to do this or confused by it. And yet, it is part of the whole truth about us: Yes, we are sinners, but, yes, a good deal of the time we are living responsibly in relationship with God and neighbor, fulfilling our mutual obligations, often with considerable kindness, graciousness, and love. And this is the power of God working in and through us; this is the power of God working in and through us so subtly and in such ordinary ways that we are often not aware of it, or we take it completely for granted. In Colossians, Paul speaks of the glorious mystery hidden throughout the ages, but now revealed, and this mystery is “*Christ in us*” (Colossians 1:26-27). The Gospel of John makes much of Christ’s being in us. Christ is the Word of God, the power of God, the love of God,

the wisdom of God, the creative energies of God. Why are we so reluctant to acknowledge this power, this love, these energies, working in and through us? I'm not sure.

So, rather than thinking of the "Five Marks of Mission" as a kind of to-do list or check list that we need to get busy doing, we would be more truthful in seeing the "Marks" as signs of what the people of God are already doing. Before we set out to do anything in the name of Christ, we ought to pause to recognize and "confess" how Christ is already working in and through us, both individually and as the Church. We need to acknowledge not only our shortcomings and failures and sins, but also to "confess" how the power of God's love is now and always has been alive and well and at work, in and through God's people.

As it happens - and to use the "Marks" as a starting point - we *are* and have been proclaiming the Kingdom (maybe not perfectly, but nevertheless...); we *are* and have been teaching, baptizing, and nurturing believers (maybe not perfectly, but...); we *are* and have been responding to human need and trying to right the wrongs of injustice. This is what the Church has been doing for 2,000 years. That we have not done these things perfectly or completely should not blind us to the fact that we have indeed done them and it is the power and love of God working in and through us. In words attributed to Teresa of Avila (1515-1582):

*Christ has no body 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,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Note the present tense; we are doing these things. We need to confess and worship and love the Christ who accomplishes so much good in and through us, his Risen Body, his Beloved Risen Body with whom he is well pleased.

We might, then, note that the "Marks of Mission" (or the "Marks of Love," as we prefer to think of them) would be more truthfully "confessed" by changing the grammar just a little bit. Instead of saying "To proclaim ... to teach ... to respond ..." etc., why don't we just say:

- We proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
- We teach, baptize and nurture new believers.
- We respond to human need by loving service.
- We transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

- We strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These things are, after all, some of the key ways in which the Church has been participating in the mission of God already. The power of God is *already* at work in and among and through us. Acknowledging this power working through us and worshiping its Source will greatly energize us to continue in “*all such good works God has prepared for us to walk in*” (to paraphrase Ephesians 2:10).

We begin by “confessing” the love of God for us and our reciprocal love for God, and by “confessing” how this reciprocity of love and delight is and has been empowering us through the ages. The right beginning of any work in the name of Christ is embracing his love, delighting in his love, returning his love, and worshiping the very Source of all love. In this reciprocal delight we may well find ourselves empowered and inspired to new ways of being, new ways of serving, new embodiments of mission.

You are beloved. You are drawn into the divine life of the One who is Love; into the life of the One who desires first and foremost your love in return. The God who delights in you desires that you delight in God. In this always-new and always-growing relationship, you will discover empowerment, gifts of the Spirit, inspiration, and “wind in your sails.”

So, what will you do next? How will love be let loose in the world through you?

For Further Reflection

- How have you come to know that God calls you “beloved”? Can you remember a “Jordan River” experience when you suddenly became aware of this, as if you heard the words spoken directly to you, “You are my beloved – I delight in you”? Or have you come to know this over time and in gradual ways?
- Have you ever told God, “You are my beloved”? Have you experienced a special time when the “circle was complete,” that is, you knew God’s love for you and your love for God? Did you give yourself time to enjoy this special moment? How does your worshiping community express their delight in God’s love?
- Of the “Five Marks of Mission,” which have you participated in either as an individual or as part of a church or other organization? Make a “confession” of all the ways you have participated in God’s mission. How have you been “the hands and feet of Christ,” as Teresa of Avila might have put it, perhaps in hidden or seemingly unremarkable ways?

Describe how it makes you feel when you know you've been caught up in the work of God.

- The fifth “Mark of Mission,” which has to do with safeguarding the integrity of creation, differs from the others, as it is not directly based on Scripture, but is a new movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church. What other ways might the Spirit be “guiding us into all the truth” over time (John 16:13), and how might these become part of the Mission of God? What other “Marks of Mission” would you add to the list?
- One Anglican diocese in Scotland, the Diocese of Saint Andrew, Dunkeld and Dunblane, lists on their website nine “Marks of Mission,” rather than five. The first begins, “We worship...” How would you complete that sentence?

Br. Mark Brown, SSJE is a life-professed Brother and a priest of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. His ministries include spiritual direction and leading retreats for individuals, groups, parishes, and dioceses in the U.S. and Canada. He serves on the Board of Directors for Kids4Peace Boston, an interfaith organization for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim youth in Jerusalem and in this country. He has visited Jerusalem many times, where he has served as chaplain for pilgrimages at St. George's College and as retreat director for the clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. He is a graduate of the University of Illinois (B.Mus., 1971, M.Mus. 1976) and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary (M.Div. 1994).

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