

Sermon 21.7.2019 in the Petri Church, Hannover International Worship

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Reading: Mt. 28, 16-20

Thuma Mina – Send me Jesus

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God as well as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen!

„We strive to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world!“ (Nike)

„One team, one plan, one goal – people working together as a lean, global enterprise...“ (Ford)

These, dear brothers and sisters, are quotations from the mission-statements of Nike and Ford, the car company, and I could have collected several more. You find them easily on the internet nowadays and they are also part of the advertisements we watch on TV in the evenings. Obviously it is of high relevance for these global players in marketing to address the audience and tell them about their vision and mission.

The Church of Jesus Christ is also a global player with a huge network, a rich tradition and a strong vision. If it comes to a mission in a Christian context, however, many of us tend to be a bit reluctant.

Is it still adequate to talk about so much and invest so much in worldwide mission? Don't we have to accept that this term is very much debated and criticised due to the historical shortcomings in the 19th and 20th century? Can we still work for mission despite the fact that the dialogue among religions and mutual respect is nowadays desperately lacking?

I guess you have come across these arguments and some of them might be your questions and feelings as well.

This morning, dear brothers and sisters, I would like to encourage us to think positively about the Christian mission and our concern to give witness to the world! I am inviting you to join me in reflecting a bit on the history of mission and how mission needs to be defined in our times!

Most interesting, mission is not a biblical word. It took the Church and theology quite a while to find this term in order to describe the energy and the desire to give witness of what we believe and trust in. So what do we mean when we talk about mission?

If we look at the gospel of St. Matthew we certainly learn about discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus Christ. St. Luke probably would remind us to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God in our world and to proclaim that glimpses of the Kingdom of God that can be experienced in our life. St. Paul, I guess, would talk about the dynamics of the good news, which needs to be conveyed to the far end of the world and finally St. John would talk to us about the Holy Spirit which enables us to become witnesses of the huge promise of life in abundance.

Let us remind ourselves of some of the stories we read in the New Testament which explain in a good way how mission can work. Nikodemus, for example, came to my mind; the Pharisee who was interested in Jesus' teaching but was afraid to contact Jesus publicly. So

he waits until dawn in order to meet Jesus secretly and talk to him about the meaning of life: Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles like you do unless God were with him....

Or I think of the disciples who were caught in mourning on their way to Emmaus. On the road, in the midst of the reflection on what had happened in Jerusalem, the risen Lord joined them on their journey helping them to understand the secrets of God's love of the world. And only when Christ took the bread at their dinner, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, were their eyes opened and they recognized him. And they said to each other: Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?

What is your favourite story in the New Testament which can help us to understand mission and which can highlight and explain those famous words from Matthew 28, which have been read to us some minutes ago: „I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all people everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.“

These words at the end of the Gospel of St. Mathews have been the motivation for many young men and women in the 19th century to join protestant mission societies in order to get trained and sent out to far away countries with a high motivation: To preach the Gospel, to educate people and to offer baptism as a symbol of God's love and of belonging to his Church.

It is very interesting and eye-opening to read stories of those missionaries who went on their own - or with wife and children - to places in Africa, Australia, Asia and Latin America in order to proclaim and evangelise in a context which was not familiar to them and among people who live in a culture in which they did not feel at home. They must have loved the adventure, they must have been ready to live in challenging situations and they certainly had a mission!

But let us be honest. The history of Christian mission is a complex story with a lot of ambivalences. We certainly know about missionaries who succeeded in living with the people who offered school education and medical help, who learnt the foreign language and translated the bible into many languages, who respected the culture of the people they were sent to and who are remembered well in the history of the Southern churches.

But we also know that there have been many experiences of cultural insensitivity and Western dominance which counteracted the life-giving and healing gospel they were supposed to preach and to live! Some blame the colonial concept of the world in those days and the vain self-understanding of white men in the North but these attempts to come to terms with what has happened in some places, is no excuse.

Talking to representatives of partner churches, I always learn a lot about those two sides of mission history. On the one hand there is a great thankfulness for the witness of our fathers and sisters in faith who introduced the Gospel to many people and who encouraged them to find an orientation in life and who helped to overcome fear and despair. On the other hand there is often a deep bitterness and there are painful memories which disavowed the Christian message and the mission of the Church.

We have to keep these ambivalences of mission history in mind and we have to accept that this history is a history of light and dark moments! It is encouraging that representatives of our partner churches in the South are inviting us to carry on in our holistic mission to the world: To talk about hope, to proclaim the gospel, to engage in justice and human rights, to support development and sustainable living, to advocate for those who are persecuted and suffer, to give witness of the love of God to everybody. They are encouraging us: Don't stop helping us to make a difference in life of our people!

But what about us here in Hanover in the summer of 2019? How do you feel about mission and our call to bring the good news to the people?

Do you remember a special situation in the recent times in which „mission“ became relevant for you? Maybe in a special moment in Dortmund at the German Protestant Church Festival, „Kirchentag“, a few weeks ago, when you talked to people you met there? Maybe in a conversation with friends here in the parish or in the context of Hanover International Service or at work or at a party or even with strangers?

I would like to tell you about an encounter in a train compartment a few weeks ago. I don't remember why but somehow the free days around Pentecost were mentioned by one of the travellers and a young man who travelled with us asked innocently: So what is Pentecost all about? I know it is a two-day holiday but what is the story behind it? He had a Bavarian accent, a friendly and polite young man - and obviously happy to start a conversation with us.

Funny enough that nobody was just hiding behind the newspapers as well as the laptops and we all tried to contribute in order to explain „Pentecost“ in our words. So we mentioned the story in Acts, one talked about the various languages and the Spirit who allowed those people in Jerusalem to understand each other, another one mentioned the birthday of the Church on Pentecost.

And the young man listened attentively and seemed to be satisfied – he obviously enjoyed our company and our readiness to talk and he informed us that he had left the church a few years ago and that he didn't see any sense in what the church is teaching.

I didn't know anybody in this train compartment but amazingly everyone now felt challenged to talk about the church, the faith and the meaning or our understanding of life. And the young man listened, argued and talked about his own life experience, his alienation from the faith but he also talked about his marriage, the love for his wife, the relevance of family and the importance of feeling at home. A good conversation!

I had to leave the train in Göttingen and I doubted that we convinced this young man but he had given us the chance to find words for our faith, for our own understanding of church and our visions in life. And I guess, dear brothers and sisters, this is what mission can mean for us today. To become aware of the treasure of faith for our life and to start sharing this experience with others. This doesn't mean that we deny or ignore mistakes and shortcomings in our own protestant and catholic history and in the life of the church – there are many - but let us also underline what has been good and comforting as well as encouraging to us in our own life experience! As Peter and John before the Council in Jerusalem, we also should be ready to say: „For we cannot stop speaking of what we ourselves have seen and heard.“

Mission is another word for talk about what we love and it is the attempt to find a language or symbols in order to express how our faith can transform our life. And certainly we would like to learn from others what they love and how this can be described. This understanding of mission opens up a dialogue of partners on equal level. We will need the readiness to listen and we will need the tolerance to allow others to speak about their faith, their religion and their way to see and understand life and the world around us.

Thuma mina Somandla – is the beginning of a South African hymn – I like it very much. And we are going to sing this hymn in a moment. Thuma mina Somandla. Send me Jesus, send me, Lord.

The Lord is calling us – we will find courage to say a word of comfort and hope. He or she is sending us into the world in order to become witnesses of the Good News. A life changing vision for the World.

And the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you always.

Amen.