

**Practicing the hospitality of God:
participating in the mission of the triune God.
John 20.19-23**

When I was asked to speak at this conference, I was told that the theme was “making a difference.” A wonderfully wide-open heading which allowed for almost anything and so several things have run through my mind over the time since. For some time I was going to focus on engaging with charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, which as I shared when I spoke at this conference in Dunedin when I first arrived at Knox in 2003 has been a significant part of my Christian journey – and re-embracing that, with much greater discernment and wisdom, after finding it somewhat pushed on to the back burner by a combination of the suspicion of academia and concern for decency and order in Presbyterianism has been part of my continuing journey in the last few years. If we want to make a difference, then we need to make space for God to act because that is what we uniquely have to offer that can make us different from other organisations.

But as I thought about it more I realised that actually it was just a part of what I feel is the challenge that lies before us which will enable us to make a real difference in the communities and world in which we live now. And that is to simply be, in all its pregnant possibilities, the church that Jesus called us into and sent us out to be in the world. And then I came across the subtitle in a later piece of publicity – “Can we rise to the challenge of being the Church in the world – making a difference for Christ’s sake” and that seemed to confirm to me anyway that I was on the right track.

As I travel around the country, I often get asked something like “do you think the church has a future?” Of course many people have been saying for some time they think it has no future, which is why so few attend. Who wants to belong to a dying institution? And the figures partic the last census would appear to support that. You may have seen in the media the big picture of those identifying as Christian declining from 48% to 37% and those with no religion increasing from 38% to 49%.

And when we look at church figures, which have consistently been declining since the 1960s the rate of decline surprised even me – Methodists by 27%, Presbyterians by 30%, Anglicans 32%, Baptists 34%. The surprise for me was that Baptists, where I had belonged most my life, had declined at a faster rate than Presbyterians and Anglicans, although rapid decline did reflect what I was hearing from some of my friends there. Out of interest Catholics declined by only 5% and Pentecostals 13%. – although it is always a bit difficult to calculate exactly which of the many groups on the census fit that category. The only increase was a combined grouping of “evangelical, born again, fundamentalist.”

As a historian one of the maxims is that if you want to understand anything you need to begin by going back to the beginning and so I want to go back to a text from the end of John’s gospel, around which I am going to frame what I want to say. **John 20.19-23:**

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. 21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

It is an interesting question of course, when did the church actually begin. Was it when Jesus called the first disciples. Well of course the church could only come into existence after the death and resurrection of Jesus and gift of the Spirit, so the day of Pentecost, Acts 2, is generally regarded as the birthday of the church. So, where does this scene in John fit, where the risen Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on to his followers on the evening of Easter Sunday, 50 days earlier. An issue of some theological debate, on which biblical commentaries spend many pages, and this is not the place to go into it. But I simply want to say regardless of what we decide, this passage contains in it everything that is needed to take the church into the future, both as it progressed over the following story in Acts or as we lean into whatever our future might be.

(1) The first thing to note is where this first church was. **The disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews.** A few days ago there were 13 of them. But they had seen their leader go, another had committed suicide after letting the side down, and a third was missing. Now only 10 and wondering how they had dwindled so quickly, and who was going to be next? Would they go down and down till no one was left? Sounds just like many churches up and down NZ today?

A dwindling group in a largely empty building, huddled behind closed doors, fearful of a culture that ridicules them, afraid to speak of their faith or identify themselves as followers of Jesus. Everywhere I go in churches I find a sense of despair and hopelessness. Like this bunch here thinking back of the times not so long ago when Jesus was alive and amongst them and now he's gone and all is lost. I have talked with a number of younger ministers who have trained with me over the past decade or so – basically the same age as my own children and a generation I have strongly identified with. There are a good number exercising excellent ministry, which is one of the major reasons giving me some hope for the future of the church – and one of them Andrew is the minister in this church – which is an added reason why I was delighted to be asked to speak. And I have talked with a number of them recently about the narrative of decline which seems to have gripped so many both in the church and outside – it is just inevitable, and to talk otherwise is to not face reality which makes it a very difficult context for them to provide leadership in. And what concerns me is so many of our structures seem to just be content with managing the inevitable decline because of our secular world rather than anticipating that God might break in and do something new and different

(2) But here suddenly Jesus shows up and stands amongst them and greets them. **Peace be with you.** Then he breathed on them an empowering breath of the Holy Spirit, the same breath with which he blew open their locked door and says **Receive the Holy Spirit.**

Jesus words **peace be with you**, repeated again a few verses later, were a standard Hebrew greeting, still used in the Middle East today. But here the words are far more than just a casual greeting. At a profoundly personal level Jesus is summing up the essence of his work and presence in the world. Peace, *shalom*, is the gift of God's reign, the fullness of life promised by the prophets, lived out in Jesus and realised for people by the ongoing presence of the Spirit. It means healing and wholeness, including peace with both God and others. In his teaching in the Upper Room he promised it to them, twice, and now through his death and resurrection he has delivered it. And when they see Jesus and hear his voice their fear is turned to joy. And this is the first essence of being the church. The presence of the risen Christ in our midst.

(3) But then we need to notice who this risen Jesus standing among them is. It was when he showed them his hands and his side they knew it was him and not some apparition or hallucination. It was the crucified and risen Christ. That is why the cross has for so long been the symbol of the Christian church. Some sections of the church focus so much on the resurrection and victory of Jesus that they have no place for suffering and the cross in their understanding of what it means to be the church, creating a sense of triumphalism and are unable to deal with the disappointments, losses and suffering that as Christ's followers we still encounter. Of course, are others who are so focussed on the cross that they never get beyond it to experience the new life the resurrection brings. It is the cross and resurrection together which brings healing and joy to both individuals and the community of God's people. That is why whenever the church has gathered together through the ages in whatever context they have shared together in eating bread and drinking wine to remind us that it is through Christ's broken body and spilled blood that we are redeemed and made whole. And it is only because of this we are reconciled with God and receive from the risen Christ God's gift of the Spirit which brings us joy as well as peace. And no matter how wonderfully we experience that life giving and transforming presence of God, our lives both individually and corporately must always be cruciform – shaped like Jesus by costly sacrificial giving for the sake of others as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so powerfully reminded us in both his writing and his living.

But not only is there this physical representation of the death of Jesus we share but also words are spoken. **Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit.**

So again through history when the church has gathered, as well as sharing bread and wine the other central element has been reading the scriptures together and hearing the word of God. As those churches which came out of the Protestant Reformation, which we all are, we hold that “wherever the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered there the church is to be found,” and as the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams pointed out when asked what is the absolute essential of being church: whenever and wherever the church has gathered in a multiplicity of ways through two millennia they have always done these two things; gathered around the scriptures to hear the word of God and shared in bread and wine together. So whatever different forms the church needs to take in this very different world we are inhabiting, these elements still need to remain central. We do need to find other ways of gathering than just sitting like people in a bus in straight rows looking at the back of the head of the person in front for an hour on Sunday morning, but the church is not just a social gathering. It is a gathering of people to meet with the risen Christ and the primary way it does that is through hearing the gospel of Christ in the scriptures and sharing bread and wine.

(4) And so the next thing is the content of the words that Jesus speaks and the consequences that followed. **Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.** In other words, as God has sent me out into the world, so I am sending you out to engage the world from which you have retreated. I don't want you in here, I need you out there.

Throughout John's gospel Jesus has been described as the One who was sent by God – in fact over 40 times. Now with his work nearly completed his final task is to commission his followers just as he was commissioned by God. So, just as Jesus was God's special representative sent into the world, so to his followers become Jesus representatives sent into the world witnessing to the reality of Christ and the God who sent him.

But also in this gospel, one feature of Jesus' commission that is emphasised more than anywhere else, is his empowering by the Spirit. God not only sent God's Son but also empowered him with the Spirit. So, in Jesus' baptism the central event as John tells it is not the water baptism itself, but the anointing in the Spirit that came to Jesus. Our first introduction to Jesus came from the prophetic words of John the Baptist, who God had told **He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.**

Above all Jesus is described as the One in whom the Spirit flows like a living spring, a source of life and refreshment and renewal that when Jesus is glorified through his death and resurrection will be offered to all. And so v.22 becomes the climax of John's gospel. Now that Jesus has been glorified and is departing the Spirit, promised in the Upper Room, is given as his farewell gift with the words **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit**

There is so much that is so important for us, as the followers of Jesus today to understand and be grasped by as we picture who we are and what in the world we are called to do. I imagine looking at the age of most of you here there are many who like me can remember the glory days of charismatic renewal in the 1970s and 80s – either negatively or positively or maybe with a mixture of both. I was pretty deeply involved in all of that, and there is much for which I am still very grateful. One of those things is that for me it was my introduction to ecumenical Christianity having been brought up in a pretty conservative Brethren then Baptist background. And the transforming discovery, despite all I had heard, of finding all these wonderful Christian sisters and brothers in Anglican, Presbyterian (in spite of Lloyd Geering), Methodist and even Catholic churches. Mentioning the latter in a sermon I preached in my home Baptist church in Timaru got me into some trouble, so my father told me after I had left town – maybe a few in those other churches, but certainly not Catholic. So much I am grateful for. But I came to see that in all the excitement about the rediscovery of the importance of the Spirit in the life of the church, and all the life-giving freedom and creativity that brought, there was something absolutely critical that was lost, as the self-centred 80s evolved, and that is by and large why it all dribbled out in the 90s. And it is this.

The point of receiving the Spirit it is abundantly clear here, is not to give the disciples new spiritual experiences so they could have a good time together, though they were going to have those. Nor is it

to set them apart from ordinary people, a sort of holier than thou club, God's special few, bound for heaven. The point is the Spirit is given so that they can do for the whole world, what Jesus was doing as he spelled it out in the synagogue in Nazareth after receiving the Spirit in his baptism. **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to those in bondage and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...** Now he simply puts it: **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.** That's why they needed the Spirit, God's breath, to enable them to do the task they could never otherwise dream of doing. And they did.

There is much talk today about being a missional church. Certainly, we Presbyterians have made it a mantra, but I'm not sure if it is much understood. It's as if putting the word missional in front of anything makes it ok. Alan Roxburgh, one of the founders of the movement, points to its recent genesis and wide misuse saying it may have the distinction of going from "obscurity to banality in ten short years" (although I doubt if he realises his desire to sell products with the label may have contributed somewhat to that??). While I agree fully with the fundamental understanding and perspective the movement expresses I believe it has now been reduced to a whole lot of talk, publications, programmes and activities which it is hoped will save the church, and like those which have come and gone over the past five decades will become one of the those of which it is said "we tried that and it didn't work."

I believe that underlying this is an inadequate theological basis for understanding what a missional understanding of both God and the church is, and in particular inadequacies in the place it gives to both the Holy Spirit and the Church. And at its heart this passage is what it is all about. The parallel between the sending of Jesus into the world by God and the sending of the church, into the world by Christ, both empowered by the same Spirit. So, if the parallel is true then mission must have the same importance for the church as it had for Jesus and the empowering presence of the Spirit is equally critical.

For quite some time the role of the Spirit was neglected in almost all missiology – it was as if in this text they stopped at v22, **I am sending you** and forgot his breathing on them with the words **Receive the Holy Spirit**. With more recent writers there has been a much stronger focus and certainly within the life of the church language of the Spirit is much more freely used, even in those churches which have some reluctance to use too much Son or Christ language – or sometimes even Jesus. However, there is quite a divergence in the understanding of what the term means and how the Spirit is at work. In mission terms it can be seen as a difference between ecumenical and evangelical understandings. I found this helpfully framed in a very constructive dialogue over a series of articles between Jurgen Moltmann (my favourite theologian) and a number of Pentecostal scholars, in which they both acknowledged they needed to learn from the other (there is hope for the unity and catholicity of the church in places!)

Moltmann tended to emphasise the 'universal' and the 'immanent' whereas the Pentecostals to focus on the 'particular' and the 'transcendent.' Moltmann focuses on how the experience of God comes through life whereas Pentecostals on how it comes through 'particular' transcendent experiences. This means Moltmann places the universal experience of life at the heart of mission, whereas Pentecostal scholars stress 'signs and wonders' and conversion as central – which reflects in part the tensions in evangelical and ecumenical approaches.

Endeavouring to develop a holistic view of mission that is faithful to the biblical witness and embraces both the evangelistic and social dimensions of mission, it can be understood within movements of the Spirit between the 'particular' and 'transcendent' and the 'universal' and 'immanent.' In other language they might be understood as the 'prophetic' and the 'contextual' working of the Spirit in mission. Both are essential and roughly equivalent to what David Bosch (who has shaped recent mission thinking more than anyone else) calls God's "no" to the world and God's "yes" to the world. Both are essential to mission and we need to be careful not to over-separate them. Prophetic movements need to acknowledge God's involvement in creation, otherwise they become irrelevant. Contextual movements need to acknowledge their relationship to the transcendent God,

otherwise they can lose their Christian distinctiveness. As one writer puts it: “Whereas pneumatically emphatic Christians can neglect the incarnational and catholic realities of mission, likewise can the heavily incarnational emphasis in emerging and missional churches lead to neglect of the possibility of the extraordinary work of the Spirit.”

Picking up on this last comment, I have had a growing concern about the missional church movement, that while there is much talk of the agency of God it mainly focuses on discerning where the Spirit is at work within the ordinary life of the neighbourhood. There is not a theology or expectation that when we engage with people in the neighbourhood this same Spirit, who is transcendent as well as immanent, will break in and be active in their lives in the name of Jesus leading to real transformation. There is some hope for community transformation but not much in personal conversion. I hear a lot use of Luke 10 but not much of the transforming encounter with the risen Christ on the Emmaus Road or the empowering by the Spirit at Pentecost later in Luke’s narrative. We are not like the earlier stories prior to the Resurrection and Pentecost – which have made a difference. The great Sri Lankan Christian leader, D. T. Niles, so significant in the growth of the ecumenical movement, said, “The Holy Spirit is the missionary of the Gospel. It is [s/he] who makes the Gospel explosive in men’s lives and in human affairs.”

Articulating this the two contributors to the missional church movement who I have found by far the most helpful, Craig van Gelder and Dwight Zscheille write: “We are witnessing remarkable signs today of the Spirit’s movement within the church around the world. Perhaps the most striking is the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and movements that highlight the Spirit’s agency and gifts. The expectant attention these churches bring to the Spirit’s work is something from which other Christian traditions might learn. This is especially the case in relation to the dramatic rise of world Christianity in the global South within cultures that were never fully secularised or Westernized. Here there is a ready openness to embodied experiences of the Spirit. Christianity is now predominantly a non-Western religion, and the Spirit is alive and well within the global church. These developments point toward the vibrant role of the Spirit in the missional church in cultivating a Spirit-shaped imagination. Focussing primarily on Christology in the missional conversation has tended to lead the church toward a backward-oriented vision, one that emphasises imitating what Christ has done in the past. We can lose our sense of what God is doing in the present and will do in the future. The Spirit is the primary way in which God acts in the world in the present. Living within God’s trinitarian life means the continual discernment of the Spirit’s movement. The missional church is a community led by the Spirit. It is a community that constantly looks for signs of the Spirit’s leading in its own life and in the surrounding neighbourhood. Its communal life must be pregnant with anticipation of the Spirit.” My significant engagement with non-western Christianity over the last 5 or 6 years has played a big part in re-engagement with this dimension of faith.

Particularly in John’s gospel, as we have seen, mission involves the full participation of all three persons of the triune God, including the Spirit. Jesus defines himself as the ‘sent one’ and his Father is defined as the ‘sender’, and the Spirit is the means by which Jesus is sent. The word from which we get the English word mission is the Latin *missio*, meaning to send. And so the Godhead itself is defined in terms of mission, sending. God is a sending God. Mission is not some added extra for a church that already exists for other reasons, some department among several the church can add on. Mission reaches right back into the eternal relations of the Trinity itself, in the dynamic interchange of sender, sent and sending; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As Moltmann puts it, “It is not so much a case that God has a mission for [God’s] church in the world but that God has a church for [God’s] mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church but the church for mission.” Or as someone else said more simply “It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world.”

The church is a result of, and continuation of, the mission of God in Christ. It is its reason for being, and when we forget that and become preoccupied or focussed on other things we lose our essence. As Emile Brunner put it, “The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” Might not our loss of this explain much of our current malaise? We do not understand what our mission is, or if we do we

think the world doesn't want to hear it and so we gather like these first followers fearful and beleaguered with our dwindling numbers behind closed doors, focused on trying to preserve what we have rather than going on the mission as we have been sent .

The other weakness I suggested in the missional church movement is the place of the church. There is often a disconnection between mission and the church reflective of that in the ecumenical movement in the 80s and 90s, "Let the world set the agenda." The church is unnecessary in God's mission in the world. Brunner's quote is often used, but what he said in the next two sentences is rarely added. "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church; and where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith."

The missional church movement grew out of engagement with the writings of Lesslie Newbigin after he returned from almost 40 years in India. As he engaged in ministry in Birmingham he realised that he had left an England in 1936 which was still a largely Christian country, but the country he returned to in 1974 was now as much a mission context as the India he had returned from. His writings raised the challenge of the church engaging in mission in the culture of the post-Christian west, and one of his early publications was titled "Can the West be Won?" Central in his response was the Church. "The primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? . . . The only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it." Out of reading Newbigin a group of scholars launched the missional church movement and the first book they published was called *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*.

How is it to be converted? By keeping central to its life the hearing of the gospel contained in the scriptures and gathering around bread and wine reminding them of the Christ who was crucified but now is risen and present in their midst. How – not physically as he was in the scene described here, but by his gift of the Spirit, promised in the upper room. It is the presence of the empowering Spirit who enables us to be transformed into a community who live by the gospel and so are able to be sent into the world to continue the mission that God had begun in Jesus. As Newbigin put it elsewhere: "It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known and experienced... But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognise that they exist for the sake of those who are not members as a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."

It is very clear in John's gospel that mission is a community task – as it is elsewhere in the NT. John does not recognise any separate class of missionaries – all are sent. The disciples become representatives for all believers who follow. In John 17 it is this whole believing community who after saying to his Father **as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world** Jesus prays specifically for all **those who will believe in me through their word**. And in Acts 2 when the Spirit comes it comes on all who were gathered as Joel prophesied. It is this believing community, empowered and unified by the Spirit, which continues Jesus' mission in the world in the same way; by sign, word and deed, or as someone described John's testimony "the most exquisite harmony of word, work and presence."

And central to that as Newbigin puts it is a community whose life together is a "hermeneutic of the gospel." Or as John puts it at the beginning of those upper room discourses, **by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another**. Self-giving love becomes the Christian brand, the distinguishing mark of the people of God, Jesus wanted to leave behind a community whose love is a magnetic force to a watching world. And they did, and it is the one characteristic that outsiders and critics simply could not ignore. As one of those put it: "See how they love one another." It was as unnatural then as it is now. How did it happen then. The only way it can happen now as well as then. By the empowering presence of the Spirit given by Jesus to that we could be transformed to live out the same kind of loved shared between the three persons of the Triune God.

Scott Sunquist, who spent much of his life in Malaysia, brings together some of critical points I have raised: “The body of Christ, not lone star Christians is the witness to the gospel. This communal witness – reflecting the presence of the triune God – requires work, repentance and self-denial in this world. The communal nature of Christianity is in stark contrast to many other religions in which devotion is a strictly private matter... The Christian life cannot be lived alone... Love requires relationship, and God is love. Godself is in community and God calls us to community... Mission has moved from church planting (church centred) to participating in the mission of God (God centred). And yet the church is still the basic structure of mission. It is the local church which is a missional presence.” (402).

And so, one final question. What is that mission? Notice Jesus mentions **peace** twice. Once when the church is gathered together, and then as he sends them into the world. There is a growing awareness among scholars of the centrality of peace in the NT, which has been much neglected. And this is the mission we are called to share in. Not keeping the wonderful peace and joy which Christ gives to ourselves as we have a great time together but, as we go, giving it away as we share it with a broken and hurting world. **If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven.** It’s not that we can forgive them, the language here makes it clear the actor in the second part is God, the only one who can forgive sin. But we have the wonderful privilege of pronouncing the forgiveness that God offers to all through the death of Jesus and the joy that comes from the gift of the Spirit.

This is our missional calling as a church to share with people God’s peace, God’s *Shalom*. A peace that comes from the Father and spills out through the outstretched hands and open heart of Jesus and beginning with forgiveness, brings through the Spirit reconciliation with God and others, healing, liberation, justice, hope, joy which we experience as we gather around Christ, but not to keep for ourselves but to take it with us as we go in the power of the Spirit from and return to that community so others can be welcomed to share in it. And as we do so they also come to participate in the hospitality of God, the love shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and given to all open to be embraced by it. Isn’t that still good news. Isn’t it even after 2000 years what people still long for?

What will the church be like going forward? Does the church even have a future in our land of Aotearoa. A couple of years ago we celebrated 500 years since the reformation when Martin Luther kicked it in to gear by posting a number of theses on the door of the local church. And out of that came the Protestant church which covered much of Europe and was exported all over the world. Some of those churches developed in Britain, particularly Anglican, Presbyterian and a bit later Methodist and arrived here after 6 weeks on some ‘waka’ or ‘leaky boats’ as one iconic kiwi song put it. It was a form of church that served well for 5 centuries, during a period known as Christendom, when you just had to ring the bell on Sunday morning, open the church door and it would be full. But that is all gone. As Kris Kristofferson sang when he heard it ringing, “it echoed through the empty canyons of my mind like the disappearing dreams of yesterday, and it took me back to somethin', that I'd lost somehow somewhere along the way.” The last remnants disappeared in the 60s and 70s and no matter how loud we ring the bell, or post on fb or advertise in the media the hordes are not going to come flooding back in, and so we need to rediscover what kind of church we need to be now as God’s missionary people.

One of the principles of the reformers was “the church reformed is always being reformed”. They didn’t just reform the church back there once and for all, something we should freeze frame for all time, but recognised it would need to be continually reformed. But the principle by which it continues to be reformed is the same as for them – in the light of the Word of God. The church faces a time when it needs renewing and reforming again and we need to allow the Spirit to kindle our imaginations by passages such as this, and as we do I have confidence that the presence of the living Christ among us can also turn our fear to joy and despair to hope, as it was for those disciples huddled in that locked room, as the Spirit breathes on us bringing us into God’s shalom so we can share with those among whom we are sent to participate in God’s mission in the world as we in our living bear witness in sign, word and deed that the triune God of love is open for human relations. This I believe is how we can make a difference in our communities and world.

My prayer for you as you move into your future in whatever church and community, is that in your going you may go living in
the overflowing love of God, the redeeming grace of Christ and the empowering breath of the Spirit.