



Yorkminster Park

BAPTIST CHURCH

Our Vision - Caring Mission

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Peter Holmes on Caring Mission

There was once a great artist, who devoted three years of his life to a mural, which he painted on an outside wall in the centre of town. Many of the townsfolk stopped to watch and to check on the development of the scene that he was setting. The magnificent scene he depicted was one which seemed to evoke almost all of life's emotions. One day the crowd of onlookers might well be laughing or cheering, while on another day, the few who could watch would surely be in tears. There was a purity and simplicity in the beauty of his painting that touched the common people as few works of art ever had. But all of that aside, there was something else about his painting. It was the way he painted people into his mural – people from the crowds that gathered each day. And how he painted them. It started one day when a young mother brought her crippled daughter to the master painter and whispered to him saying, "No one else sees any value in my daughter, but I know that if you will only paint her into your picture it will do wonders for her self-esteem." Please. And so while she sat before him, the master set his sights on her. His portrayal of her was amazing. It allowed others to see things in her that they had never noticed before – beautiful things, wonderful things.

No one who saw the painting of the girl saw a crippled child. It was amazing, but more amazing still was the fact that at the end of the session, in full view, the girl got up and walked home. It was a miracle! The next day there was a lineup of people who wanted to be painted into his mural. There was a man with a withered hand, a man who'd been blind from birth, and a bereaved mother. There were other folks in the line who held their heads in shame. The crowd could be heard saying things like, He hasn't shown his face around these parts in years, and Isn't he the one who was caught red-handed. But when their turn with the master came and he painted them into his great mural, people saw them as they had never seen them before, and each one went away as a new person. It was miraculous!

One day the news circulated that the master artist was finishing the mural, and so all of his students, his friends and followers gathered to watch. After they watched him add a few strokes here and there, it became very clear that the mural at last was done. The crowd broke into applause at the completeness and perfection, until suddenly the artist turned and silenced the crowd. It was then that he spoke the words, "No, it is not done, it is only just begun." As he continued to offer them words of hope and instruction, he gathered up his brushes and began circulating through the crowd, offering to each one a brush. He motioned to other walls and alluded to the people, the many people he had not yet painted into the picture.

That is where we find ourselves on Ascension Sunday. Just when we thought that the gospelwriter's portrayal of Jesus was perfect and complete, just as we are about to close the book on Jesus, the risen Christ turns and hands us all a paintbrush, and says, No, I have only just started this story, it is up to you to finish it. And with that he disappeared. So what do we do? Where do we start? The text suggest three things that Jesus gave us to finish his work.

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The first thing that Jesus gave us to continue his work was a pattern. It is not a paint by number pattern, or a stencil with which we copy. There is plenty of room for individual creativity, but it is a pattern in the sense that it is an example for us to follow, and the pattern we have is the life and ministry of Jesus. You see, Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything he hasn't already done himself. And that is of great comfort to me.

My son played hockey over the winter. It was the youngest level and a lot of fun to watch. There was one exceptional player on the team whose father often stood next to me at the games and at the practices. He was very vocal and sometimes even disapproving. If his boy made a mistake he was sure to hear about it and so was everybody else. I thought to myself, He has high standards. He must have been quite a player in his time. But then one day the father told me in a begrudging sort of a way that he'd never been given the chance to play hockey and so he didn't want his son to blow it.

Well Jesus isn't like that. He has laced up his boots and has gotten his hands dirty and bloodied. He asks us to do nothing that he hasn't already done himself. And he is patient. I discovered that one of the fathers had been quite a player in his day. The funny thing was that his son struggled with the game, and yet all year long I heard only encouragement and praise from that father. That is what Jesus is like. The writer to the Hebrews wrote that we don't have a High Priest who is indifferent to the struggles of this life. Our mission is rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus. And so we have a coach in Jesus who can show us the steps, but who also understands when we are slow to catch on.

The late comedian Groucho Marx is remembered for his quick and cutting wit, but he also offered some powerful and tragic lines. One of them which I recently came across went like this. My plans are still in Embryo, a small town on the edge of Wishful Thinking. Now if Jesus handed us the paintbrush and said, I have a wish list of what I want you to paint but it is still in the embryo stage, we might well put the brush down and walk away. But when Jesus handed us the brush to finish his work, there is a very real sense in which the masterpiece was finished. Jesus proclaimed it from the cross, It is finished. The price has been paid. Therefore, wrote Paul, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... For God has done what the law... could not do. It is finished! God has done it! The work of Jesus is not in embryo, a small town on the edge of wishful thinking. It is already mature and bearing fruit. We have a pattern and more, an example which to follow. It is the life of Christ. Therefore, if we as a church are to fulfill our mission in this world, we must keep our hearts always focussed on Jesus. We must immerse ourselves in his story, in his words, and in his deeds. For we are to be his witnesses.

We are to carry on his work. He said, "Go into all the world", which is where he went. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son. Jesus doesn't ask us to go anywhere he hasn't gone or to do anything he hasn't done. Jesus had just spent three years making disciples when he turned to his disciples and said, It is your turn to make disciples. He also asked them to teach, to teach what he had taught them. He gave us a pattern.

When Jesus came to Peter, he didn't hand him a brush, but rather, he gave him a set of keys. Peter, their sins are forgiven. You just need to go and open the doors and set free those who are still living like captives to sin and selfishness and guilt. Our mission is to offer forgiveness to the world, in the name of the Jesus, who has already forgiven them. Of course if we are to offer forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive like Jesus. Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything he hasn't already done. We are to feed the hungry, remembering that Jesus has already set the table and broken the bread.

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A few years back the popular singer, Van Morrison, had a hit song about the church's mission. He sang, He heals the sick, and he heals the lame. He says, you can do it too in Jesus' name. And he lifts you up, and he turns you around. And he puts your feet on higher ground. The whole world has tapped its feet to that tune. They know what Jesus did, and they're waiting for us to do it too, in Jesus name. We've just got to pick up that brush and paint this world as God sees it.

So first of all, Jesus gave us a pattern for our mission, and the pattern was his own life. The second gift Jesus offers us for our mission is a presence. He doesn't ask us to do anything he hasn't done, and he doesn't ask us to do anything alone. For he promises us a presence.

For years I have tried to disprove a line in Arthur Miller's play, *All My Sons*. It is a play about a wartime factory owner, named Joe Keller, who cuts corners on the planes he is building for the Air Force in order to make a few extra dollars. But it turns out to be a fatal shortcut. He saves some money but his son, who is overseas serving as an Air Force pilot, loses a number of his comrades in a series of plane crashes which wouldn't have happened had his father not cut corners. And so, tragically, when his oldest son learns the truth about his father he commits suicide. But there is a younger son named Chris, who is still at home, and when he learns the truth, he confronts his father. And in response his father, Joe Keller, said emphatically, Chris, a man can't be a Jesus in this world! When I read that line in an English class back in university, I thought, Joe Keller you're wrong, and it is my mission to prove it.

But it wasn't that long ago that it hit me that I'm further away from proving it than I was away back then. I can't be a Jesus in this world. I'm too inadequate. I'm so prone to sin and selfishness. The harder I try the more I feel like J. D. Salinger's tragic character, Holden Caulfield. Young Holden was burning out and breaking down when he told his dear sister, Phoebe, that he'd always wanted to be the person in the song, If a body catch a body coming through the rye. He envisioned thousands of children running and playing games in the rye fields, but they were unaware that at the edge of the field was a great cliff. Holden saw himself as the only person who could stand on the edge of the cliff and catch the children before they fell. He wanted to save the world, but he was breaking down because he was too inadequate for the task. He couldn't even save his own soul. And then Phoebe reminds him that he's got the song all wrong. It's, If a body meet a body coming through the rye, she said. We get it all wrong too. We think that all on our own we've got to save the world, as if we're the only one to whom the master gave a paintbrush to, but we're in this thing together. When a body meet a body. Together we are the body of Christ. We are not alone. He gave us the presence of each other.

Jesus said, Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst. We are not alone in our mission. We have each other and we need each other. For when we are together, working side by side, each one exercising her or his own unique gifts and talents, we will be Jesus Christ in this world and we will know that, lo, he is with us always, even unto the end of the age.

So as we endeavour to carry on the work of Jesus Christ in this world we have these gifts from the Lord, first a pattern on which to base our mission. For Jesus has not asked us to do anything that he didn't do himself. Second, we have a presence with which to face the world. For Jesus has not asked us to do anything alone. And third, we have a power from on high. On the Day of Ascension Jesus commissioned his disciples saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth; go therefore and make disciples. We go in faith, believing that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. The power that

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Jesus promised was poured out on the church ten days after Christ's ascension, when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost. And on that day, the Apostle Peter rose up and preached Jesus Christ, and people from all over the world believed in the good news. And so this very season, between the two great days of Ascension and Pentecost, is a season when the church should be alert to the call of Christ, sensitive to the power of the Holy Spirit, and ready for mission.

Some of the greatest missionary works in history have been born in this very week. Charles Wesley was converted on Pentecost Sunday in 1738, and his brother John three days later. And from that day forward God began a mighty work through them.

It was on the very Day of Ascension in 1792 when another English cleric rose up and preached a sermon in which he challenged the other churches in his Baptist Association to send a missionary abroad. He reminded them of Jesus Ascension day commission, to go into all the world, and he coined a rather catchy phrase, Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God. But there were no foreign missionary societies in those days, and most of his fellow ministers discouraged it, arguing that, Charity begins at home. But what they hadn't realized was that this young preacher, like his Lord, considered the whole world his home.

This 31 year-old preacher wouldn't have been the popular choice to go. He came from one of the smallest churches where the congregation was so poor that they couldn't pay him. And so he worked as a cobbler and volunteered as a minister. But it was there, over the bench in his cobbler's shop that a hand-drawn map of the world was hung on the wall, and every day William Carey would look at that map and pray for the world.

So it was that William Carey was sent as the first missionary of the modern era to India and for seven years he had nothing to show for his labours, but illness, grief and failure. But he didn't give up, because he trusted in God's higher power.

The rest is history. William Carey went on to found schools and translate many books, including the Bible. He is credited with having taught the nation to read. He led the successful crusade to abolish the ancient Indian practice of sati, in which thousands and thousands of widows were cremated each year beside their deceased husbands. He stopped, too, the burning of lepers and orphans and built instead great orphanages and leprosy hospitals. Carey became a leading scholar in the field of agriculture and introduced a new era of farming to the nation. In his spare time, which was usually before seven in the morning, Carey built India's two most beautiful gardens. And a day rarely went by in which Carey, decked out in the native dress, didn't mount a soapbox in the city streets and launch into a sermon about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Do you see what Carey was up to? Nothing less than seeing India through Christ's eyes and painting it in the colours of heaven. Someone who didn't like him once introduced him at a gathering, reminding the crowd that he was only a shoemaker. Carey could well have countered the introduction with a long list of his accomplishments, but instead he responded by saying, Oh no, I'm not a shoemaker, I'm just a poor cobbler. Carey had no interest in receiving credit, because the power and the glory belonged to God. It was by God's power, not his own.

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The truth is that everything has come full circle since the times of Wesley and Carey. The church and its mission have fallen on hard times. But friends, this is Ascension Sunday. This is the season when the winds of the Spirit first began to blow on the church, and when the master painter, Jesus Christ, first turned and offered each one of us a brush. With it comes the pattern, the presence, and the power to paint something beautiful for God. Let us take the brush and begin today, so that we may see this world through Jesus eyes and love it as only he could!