

## List of Bible Studies

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**Matthew 28.16-20:**

1. This passage is often referred to as *The Great Commission* – perhaps unhelpfully since there are alternative ‘commissioning’ passages at the end of the other Gospels eg Luke 24.44-47; John 20.19-23 which provide complementary understandings of the ‘mission’ for which the disciples of Jesus were commissioned. But the terminology is significant – until fairly recently this passage has been perhaps the most widely used biblical mandate - at least in Western Christianity – to justify the ‘missionary movement’ of the Church. (For example in the ‘variant’ form in which it appears as a secondary addition to Mark’s Gospel it features on the portals of Partnership House, the building where I am based and where the Anglican mission agencies USPG and CMS are housed.) Yet interestingly this passage was not used in the early centuries of the Church’s life to provide warrant for mission. Lesslie Newbigin and R. Sugirtharajah have shown that it only became associated with the Church’s missionary activity at the close of the 17th century. However the way that the passage has often been understood, rightly or wrongly, as a ‘command’ does in itself affect our understanding of mission. It has been suggested that it can lead to mission being depersonalised and the command itself as the marching order of a Christian militia, engaged in a holy war!

**What is the primary biblical passage/text on which your own view and understanding of mission is based? On which the understanding of the Church in your context is typically based? Do you think it is helpful that so much weight has been given to these verses in Matthew in developing our understanding of mission?**

2. One of Bishop John Taylor’s (former Bishop of Winchester, General Secretary of CMS, and previously head of a theological college in Uganda) last published works was called *The Uncancelled Mandate*. The title seems to be an allusion to this passage and the ‘mandate’ it contains. In *The Uncancelled Mandate* John Taylor is arguing that the current focus in mission thinking on the concept of *missio dei* – though ‘gloriously inclusive’ is not without cost. ‘There is an inherent, if not deliberate, vagueness in the term, “Mission of God” (*missio dei*) which lays it open to abuse. It can be made to include anything under the sun that anyone considers A Good Thing.’ Bishop Taylor comments that ‘*missio dei*’ talk seems to confuse the vast inclusiveness of the ultimate purpose of God for the creation, with the particular scope of the Christian mission – the mandate for which – as the title of his booklet suggests – remains uncancelled. ‘The primary aim of all Christian mission in all its varied activities is to present the person of Jesus Christ, to make him visible, to lift him up, as he truly was and is, so that he rather than anything else we bring may draw all to himself.’ Matthew 28.16-20 – with its apparently ‘uncancelled’ mandate to make disciples might well be seen as offering a good example of the ‘Christian mission’ which John Taylor is seeking to affirm. ‘Matthew’s model of mission has rightly been characterized as ‘mission as disciple making’... this didactic model is a challenge to modern conceptions.’ (*Johannes Nissen, New Testament and Mission*, Peter Lang, 1999)

**How far would you agree with Bishop Taylor’s comments from your own perspective and context? Do you feel that recent thinking about *missio dei* has been unhelpfully ambiguous – or has its inclusiveness been useful in our religiously pluralist world, which seeks to move away from the era of colonialism? Does Matthew 28.16-20 provide an important corrective – or is it an embarrassment in the age of *missio dei*?**

3. However it is arguable that much interpretation of Matthew 28.16-20 has been over simplistic – and that better understood some of the tensions we might feel about this passage dissipate. Though our text only comprises 5 verses they have a key position as the climax of the Gospel. ‘All the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew,

from chapter 1 on, draw together here.' (*Bosch, Transforming Mission*) The particularly intricate way in which Matthew wrote his book means that for a full understanding of Matthew 28.16-20 we need to explore other parts of the Gospel, eg

a) The birth narrative Matthew 1 – 2

b) The temptation narrative Matthew 4.1-11

c) The mission discourses in Matthew 10. 5-42; 24 – 25.

a) In Matthew 1.23 the key promise of Jesus as Emmanuel at the beginning of Jesus' life ('God with us') deliberately balances the pledge that is offered in 28.20 ('I will be with you till the end of the age'.)

b) The temptation narrative of 4.1-11 seems to offer a deliberately contrasting 'model of mission' to that implied in Matthew 28.16-20. There are significant parallels of vocabulary between the 2 passages ('worship', 'all', 'power/authority') and both are set on a mountain. It seems that Matthew is suggesting that there are two alternative models of mission – that proposed by Satan – in which obedience to Jesus can be compelled by his earthly power – and an alternative model, in which the Cross is gone through – so that - although the scene is on a mountain top, Jesus is 'with' and 'among' his disciples rather than 'up above' them. And if further read in the light of passages such as Matthew 25.31-31-46, the Sheep and the Goats, we discover that 'Jesus with us' can be found in some unlikely places. The Jesus who commissions his disciples in Matthew 28.16-20 is clearly a figure of great authority – but the linked contrast with 4.1-11 offers a challenge to many of our established ideas of what authority is and how it should be exercised.

c) As suggested in the previous paragraph – the other two mission discourses in Matthew can help fill out the content and method of mission – and are important to look at alongside Matthew 28.16-20. 'Because God has chosen this way to be incarnated, to be present among people, to reign, he will only reach all Gentile nations if disciples reach them and if Christian communities live there in clear reference to the Nazarene and his teaching. This is what Matthew 28.16-20 expresses. But he will only reach the nations if the bearers of the Gospel of the kingdom, the evangelising disciples, come as poor, exposed, defenceless men and women, living with and not above those to whom they bring healing.' (*Jacques Matthey, The Great Commission according to Matthew, International Review of Mission, 1980*)

**What does it mean to call Jesus 'Emmanuel' in your particular context and situation? Is it a helpful or unhelpful mode of thinking? What is the 'model of mission' that you feel is/has been operative in your context? 'From above' or 'alongside with'? How does this impact on relating to people of other faiths?**

4. Other exegetical issues raised by Matthew 28.16-20 which link to our interest in mission/interfaith issues include:

a) The mission is entrusted to those who 'doubt'. The Greek of 28.17 is ambiguous – though normally translated 'but some doubted' – it might mean 'they worshipped but they doubted.'

'It is precisely those disciples who submit – but still have fundamental doubts who are sent out in mission.'

'Christians are called to mission as people who confess Jesus as Son of God and King, but who also experience crises in their faith, doubts about the central Christological affirmation of their faith, Christians who are not always so sure that eventually God's power and kingdom will break through and make the impossible possible.'

(*Matthey*) It is interesting to be reflecting on this here in India, in view of the fact that St Thomas, traditional founding father of Indian Christianity – precisely because of his own doubts – was led to make the supreme Christological confession of the New Testament 'My Lord and my God.' (*John 20.28*)

**Does such a lack of certainty provide a helpful pattern for those of us who are puzzled as to what is the appropriate model of mission in a world of many faiths? Can Christ's mission be better accomplished when those who engage in it are not completely sure they have all the answers?**

b) The relationship between verses 18 and 19 is significant. Verse 18 announces Jesus' universal authority as already 'given'. The apparent command of verse 19 begins with a consequential 'therefore'. So it is important to note that the disciples are not sent out in mission *in order* to establish Jesus' sovereignty – since that is already established. 'The Great Commission' expresses rather a creative proclamation of what already is – empowering the disciples in their ministry.

**Do we sometimes behave and act as though Jesus' sovereignty depends on us?**

c) As suggested above, for Matthew, mission = discipling. The verb used here, *matheteuein* is quite rare in the NT – appearing once in Acvts 14.21, and here and at two other points in Matthew (*Matthew 13.52 and 27.57*) The disciples are called to make disciples – that is a justification for suggesting that the role of / instructions to the disciples of the earthly Jesus in the earlier part of Matthew's gospel, are intended as a clear pattern for Matthew's readers – and ourselves. Discipling is the 'controlling' verb in this verse. the participles baptising and teaching are dependent upon this, and seem to be envisaged as part of what discipling is about. Note however the comment that the teaching is 'all that I have commanded you'. There is a clear reference back to what the earthly Jesus (as presented by Matthew) has already said. There is perhaps a difference of emphasis here – though certainly not a direct contradiction – vis a vis the Johannine model that 'the Spirit will lead you in to

all truth’.

When we seek to discover just what Jesus has commanded however – it seems to be summed up in the ‘love commandment’. That seems to be a key to the proper understanding of the Great Commission. ‘It is unjustifiable to regard the “Great Commission” as being concerned primarily with “evangelism” and the “Great commandment” (Matthew 22.37-40) as referring to “social involvement”.’ (*Bosch*)

It has been rightly said that Matthew stands firmly against the modern tendency to separate Christian education and evangelism. However the ‘teaching’ that Matthew proposes is not a course of indoctrination but as an incorporation of ever new members into the learning community.

Jacques Matthey puts it like this: ‘According to Matthew’s “Great Commission”, it is not possible to make disciples without telling them to practice God’s call of justice for the poor. The love commandment, which is the basis for the church’s involvement in politics, is an integral part of the mission commandment.’

### **What does this suggest about mission and inter faith concerns in an unjust world and unjust local context?**

#### **What does mission as disciple making mean for us today?**

d) ‘Make disciples of *all nations*’ How should this be understood? As granting permission – or instructing Christ’s missionaries to do their job thoroughly. It is arguable by several significant missiologists that ‘all the nations ’ might be better translated ‘all Gentiles’. If this is correct then the corollary may be that what we have here is the granting of permission to extend Christ’s mission to the Gentiles which has, according to Matthew, up till now been restricted to ‘Israel.’ In other words it becomes not so much a ‘must’ as a ‘may’.

#### **Is this a valid interpretation – and what might it mean for Christian mission today?**

And the final question to which all the others inevitably link:

#### **What does it mean to interpret Matthew 28.16-20 in a context of many faiths? Is there any way to do so which does not inevitably imply a desire for Christian supremacy and yet affirms that Christ’s mandate to his disciples remains ‘uncancelled’?**

*Clare Amos*

August 2003

### **Matthew 28 Meditations**

The following prayers and meditations linked to Matthew 28.16-20 which are drawn from different geographical contexts may help illuminate the issue in a ‘different’ way

We are wayfarers, following roads  
to the ends of the earth,  
pilgrims on our way to the end of the age.  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.

We are travellers on the road to freedom,  
a community of grace  
with good news for all we meet.  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.

We’ll travel lightly, travel together,  
learn as we go; we are disciples,  
our mission is love,  
the journey is long.  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.  
We’ll travel with authority  
fearful of none;  
we are sent, opponents of evil,  
heralds of hope.  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.

We'll travel with humility,  
no task is too small;  
we are servants, the cross is our compass,  
love is our sign.  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.

When the way is uncertain, shadows are sinister,  
and dangers threaten,  
we'll not be afraid, but take heart  
Behold I am with you  
to the end of the age.

*(From 'Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation', Centre for Mindanao Studies, Philippines)*

O God of love and mercy, your Son Jesus Christ has commanded us to preach and teach and baptize people in Jesus' name. Help us to carry out this great commission with humble hearts. *(Pacific)*

Let us thank God for calling men and women to serve his work in the world.  
For all faithful prophets, ministers and teachers of the past;  
For apostles sent into the world boldly to witness to your deeds of grace;  
For pastors who have lovingly gathered and tended your flock;  
For those who have led us into the way of faith;

Gracious Lord, we give you thanks  
for all saints of the past.  
For your coming to earth as a humble servant;  
For emptying, and spending yourself for the welfare of all;  
For shepherding the lost sheep with unceasing concern;  
For your costly obedience, even unto death on the cross;  
Gracious Lord, we give you thanks  
for your ministry of love.

For rising again as living Lord, to continue his task among us;  
For calling us to minister in love as your new body;  
For giving each one your grace-gifts to carry out this task;  
For challenging us each day with new opportunities for service;  
Gracious Lord, we give you thanks  
for your confidence in us.

For bringing us together at this time, each from his own congregation and church;  
For showing us new possibilities of ministry for this new age;  
For daily revealing yourself to us here; and  
For your promise to be with us to the end of time;

Gracious Lord, we give you thanks  
for the hope with which we can now face the future  
*(India, service for rededication of ministers)*

Draw your Church together, O Lord, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and together witnessing to his love on every continent and island  
*(Canada)*

Our Lord Jesus Christ sends you out in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit to be his faithful witnesses to your family, you your country, and to the ends of the earth. *(Iran, prayer at end of confirmation service)*

The world isn't won  
With church statistics  
on compact discs  
With escapist bright  
free offers,  
vacuum packed,  
market researched,

teflon coated,  
via satellite.

Jesus sends us out  
Without this gear;  
Not to make the gospel easy,  
Just to make it clear.

He sends not combine harvesters,  
but only his own labourers,  
poor and vulnerable,  
weak, dependent,  
humbly serving,  
healing, preaching.  
Believe it or not,  
Like it or not,  
The kingdom's come  
For the King has come;  
A reign of peace,  
Or sentence of doom.  
*Graham Kings, England*

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4; 5:14-21

These chapters centre upon Paul's understanding of the core of ministry. They are an apologetic for himself, and the compulsion he feels driven by. This means he is able to cope with success or failure, in his mission to commend Christ. In Ch 5, this centres upon how God was in Christ. The heart of the incarnation is to bring about reconciliation, and that mission is now enjoined upon us, to enable reconciliation between God and humanity, and between human beings. Elsewhere we have seen how this means bringing down barriers between Jew and Greek, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free (Gal 3:28; I Cor 12:13; Col 3:11). These fundamental divisions are to be transcended in Christ. **Can we add to this 'Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jew'?** **If Christ is all in all, and without the Logos nothing was made that was made, can we extend this list to accept that all can be embraced within this understanding of reconciliation? Paul's understanding of reconciliation centres on cross and resurrection, and the righteousness of God revealed there. Can these key events avail beyond the boundaries of the church and explicit Christian belief?**

4:1, 16-18: The same phrase 'we do not lose heart' appears twice. This links with the catalogue of struggle listed in 8 and 9, which in their turn can be linked with I Cor 4:9-13, and 2 Cor 6: 3-10. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul is acutely aware of the struggles of sustaining his ministry and mission. This is part of his identifying with the sufferings of Christ (v.11; Phil 3:10). These come both from external opposition and hostile actions, and internal division and strife. This latter is more painful, since it is about potential schism within the Body of Christ, where there is supposed to be one Spirit. Such is outlined memorably at the beginning of 1 Corinthians. He does not lose heart because of his deep experience of the love of Christ- 5:14, 'the love of Christ urges us on.' Paul was involved often in an unpopular mission, that of reconciliation across divisions which have existed since time immemorial. **What are the divisions, internally and externally, we encounter as we engage across faiths in our context? Are there specific occasions when we have been near to losing heart? We may want to share one of these each. What has kept us going?**

4: 2: Paul emphasises his determination to renounce cunning ways in commending God's word, and his focusing on 'open statement of the truth.' (cf Eph 4:15- 'speaking the truth in love'. Col 4: 2-6 provides a little vignette of the approach to sharing the word). We live in an age of 'spin', when there is even a profession of 'spin doctors.' We have become very sceptical of such an overemphasis on communication as opposed to content, in the world of politics or advertising. **Does Christian evangelism with people of other faiths often fall into this trap? What is our experience of this, and how do people of other faiths respond? We can reflect too on our experience of receiving 'the Word' from, say Muslims or Hindus? What kind of message do we respond well to, even if we do not accept it; what kind of communication from them do we react against? Give concrete examples. Do we have examples where dialogue, formal or informal, has led to a real sharing of each other's understanding of truth, with an honesty which involves mutual respect.**

4: 4: Paul uses the description of Christ as 'the image of God.' (cf. 3.18). This phrase is highly provocative when we are engaged in dialogue with Muslims. So also many other phrases about the nature of Christ, for example, 'Son of God.' 'Lord'. We may be tempted to down peddle our Christology, in the interests of harmony. **Are there**

**occasions when we are right to do this? How can we explain Christ to Hindus or Muslims, without using these phrases, but giving them an account of the faith within us, which is faithful to the essence of our Christology? What would we say in our context?**

4:5: A vital challenge, when we are communicating with people of other faiths, whether in words or in deeds, or by how we are. So easy to communicate ourselves, rather than Christ, and we are only 'clay jars (v.7). These jars are like the clay tea cups given out in North India, on railway stations. They are thrown away after the tea is drunk. We are in the end totally expendable, as individuals, but the light of Christ is like the tea in the cup, it is life giving. **Think of those of other faiths with whom we have engaged. Give examples of those who have impressed us, and those who have put us off. Is this because of how far they have commended their message rather than themselves? Examine our own ways of being, commending and acting the Gospel. Share any example in our context of someone who has lived this verse of Paul, in their inter faith engagement, and how this has affected people of other faiths.**

4:6: cf 3:17-18. There is a process of transformation, or transfiguration involved in our reflection of Christ, and the end is for us truly to reveal 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.' This is an awesome task, which lies beyond all our halting attempts at dialogue or evangelism. **Is the light and glory of God a limited one, or does it embrace those with whom we are in dialogue? Is that glory about God's generosity in creation-making all in God's image- but also in the area of ultimate salvation?**

4:15: Grace and thanksgiving are at the centre of Christian response to the gospel (cf Eph 5: 19-20). Rowan Williams wrote as he took up the role of Archbishop, of the Church of England, that this Church has lost its sense of joy and wonderhood, 'We look at one another with boredom and anxiety rather than with the expectant joy of Christ.' 'A younger church, which is still surprised and astonished about the experience of being wanted and valued by God, turns to the traditional "sending" churches and says to them effectively and powerfully, "you are wanted too."' **Reflect on these ideas in terms of your inter faith work. How far does it reflect 'grace and thanksgiving', and expectant joy, rather than anxiety? Do we really learn from each other and feel we are all wanted, across the Anglican Communion, as Rowan wishes? Give examples of what we have learned from Anglicans of other backgrounds, in this area?**

5:14: 'The love of Christ urges us on.' We can almost feel the motivating force that Paul is conscious of. He knows he is loved. Elsewhere he would suggest that he is driven by the Spirit. The message is about the universal saving consequences of Christ's death. In inter faith dialogue are we tempted to avoid the cross, since it is often found to be divisive. We then may compartmentalise the cross, to be the centre of evangelism and not dialogue, because the cross is a scandal or foolishness. **If we believe that God is equally generous in salvation as in creation, how do we convey the meaning of the cross, when talking with a Muslim, Hindu, Jew, Sikh? Give examples.**

5:16-17: We are encouraged to see God in all persons. Paul had been transformed in his understanding of Christ by his Damascus Road experience. Hindus have a strong belief in God in all things and persons, as reflected in Hindu greetings- 'May the God in you be blessed' (namaste, namaskaram, vannakam). **If we hold this view, that God is already in the other, where is the place for Christian evangelism? If God is there already, what does 'being a new creation in Christ' mean?**

5:18-20: In the Church of England ordinal, this passage is read at the ordination of priests. It is seen as being at the heart of Christian ministry, but does not appear in the 5 marks of mission, or in the paradigm's in Bosch's all embracing work, *Theology of Mission* (Orbis). There are chapters on Mission as mediating salvation, as the quest for justice, as evangelism, contextualisation, liberation, inculturation, common (ecumenical) witness, ministry by the whole people of God, witness to people of other living faiths, theology, action in hope. This book was written in 1991, and the Lambeth Marks were for the Lambeth Conference of 1988. Mission as reconciliation has come to fore in the last decade. This is both vertical reconciliation to God, and horizontal reconciliation of human beings, one to another. More and more of the wars and deepest divisions in humanity are bound up with religious, as well as political and economic identity- 9/11 is only the sharpest indication of a catalogue of divisions. Two powerful recent books on reconciliation are Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: spirituality and strategies* (Orbis 2002), and John Paul Lederach, *The Journey towards Reconciliation*, (Herald, 1999). Lederach has a beautiful meditation on the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25-33, where Jacob ends by saying to Esau, 'Please; accept my present from my hand. For truly to see *your face* is like seeing *the face of God*- since you have received me with such favour.' (33:10). **Have we seen the face of God across the divide of faith? How do we recognise that face?** To this we can add Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future without Forgiveness* (Rider, 1999). These books are largely about racial, political, economic and personal reconciliation. They are very practical, as well as deeply spiritual. **Give examples of your involvement, or your church's involvement in mission as inter faith reconciliation. What are the key practical strategies,**

from these examples, bearing in mind that reconciliation has to involve action from two sides? How far does such action, lead to a transformed spirituality for all participants, where there is a sense of being reconciled to each other, but also to God? Do you think we can add 'mission as reconciliation' to the 5 marks of mission for the Communion, with an emphasis on reconciliation between faiths (inter faith dialogue or evangelism does not feature in the 5 marks of mission).

Andrew Wingate. August 18th 2003

### John 4.1-42:

One of the intriguing features of David Bosch's work *Transforming Mission* which has become a fundamental textbook in mission studies is how little space he gives to the Gospel of John. Though there are chapters discussing mission in Matthew, Luke-Acts and Paul, there is no corresponding chapter for John. This is surprising since John 20.21-22 – the post-resurrection commissioning by Jesus of his disciples in this Gospel, 'As the Father has sent me so I send you. When he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" ' – could be described as perhaps the most profound mission text in the entire New Testament, taking as it does mission back into the heart of the life of the Trinity. We will look at the question of Bosch's omission later in these notes – but it is worth bearing in mind as we study the long – and very rich – passage John .4.1-42 – Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well of Samaria.

It has been said that this story functions as an illustration in story form of the essence of mission in John's Gospel. It may well be linked to the historical 'mission to Samaria' that took place in the early Church, but as it is told it offers important insights into the nature of mission in all time and all place.

At the very heart of the story is the overlap between physical and spiritual 'living water'. In semitic languages such as Hebrew the normal expression for 'running water' (ie fresh water than comes from a spring rather than still, and possible contaminated, water from a well) is *mayim haim* which literally means 'living water', and this linguistic pun lies the heart of the story. The episode in the Gospel of John is one of the most cherished in the Gospel by Christians in Asia and Africa who know all too well the need for fresh water and how collecting this water is a daily and burdensome chore for women. The liberation that Jesus offers in the course of this story is therefore especially precious. By its very nature – linked to the everyday but essential needs of all human beings, this story is one that helps us bridge the boundaries erected by faith and culture. There is in fact a very similar story told in Asia about one of the disciples of the Buddha who asks for water from a young girl of the *chandal* caste (one of the lowest castes).

Breaking down barriers lies at the very heart of this Gospel story. The hostility and social apartheid between Jews and Samaritans was a well-known feature of life in first century Palestine. In terms of the essentials of faith there was comparatively little that separated the two groups. Their main point of argument lay over where the Temple should be located – was it Jerusalem (Judaism) or was it Mount Gerizim (the Samaritans, see John 4.20)? But this difference was enough to lead to a rigorous separation between the two communities. Each considered the other defiled and impure. They certainly would not share food, drink or eating utensils. (*John 4.9*) which was the reason for the woman's surprise at Jesus' initial request to her. What is more the apparently irregular marital situation of the woman (*John 4.17-18*) and her need to draw water at the hottest point of the day when other women were not around were both pointers to the fact that even within her Samaritan society the woman would have been regarded as 'unclean'.

But Jesus refuses to be bound by the protocols of division, and uses his and her common need – for water – to lead the woman and himself forward in mutual liberation. In fact he takes the initial step along this path by asking to receive water from this 'unclean' woman. 'He receives from her the water his thirsty body needs. To receive from someone in such cultures is to show respect to the giver.' (*Andrew Wingate, 'Free to Be'*) Mukti Barton, a Christian writing about this story from the perspective of Bangladesh, notes,

' There is no dichotomy between the giver and the receiver or between heaven and earth. Everything is interrelated. The liberation of the woman at the well eventually frees both Jesus and the woman together. On the spiritual level Jesus is thirsty as long as the Samaritan woman is. His own thirst for righteousness is quenched by valuing the Samaritan woman. Jesus in the story is in total solidarity with the woman.'

In a dramatic retelling of the Buddhist story referred to above the monk responds to the hesitation of the young *chandal* girl to offer him water because 'the water of my well is defiled' by commenting, 'I am the same as you, a human being'. After he has received water from her she sings, 'Oh what joy, what liberation! Only a drink of water – it has washed all the blemishes of my life!' Sister Vandana, a Christian scholar from India, in her studies

on St John's Gospel *Waters of Fire* also notes the 'caste' issues in the story, which make it such a powerful statement of the Gospel for many Indian Christians.

What is the link between clean physical water and the 'water of life'? What does this story suggest for us today about the interrelationship between mission, inter faith dialogue and practical action which breaks down the barriers imposed by poverty, cultural custom or prejudice? How appropriate is it for those suffering as a result of such barriers to engage in an intellectual and spiritual dialogue with those whose actions are responsible for them?

One of the features of the story is the emphasis on the vulnerability of both Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus is thirsty and 'tired out by his journey' (*John 4.6*) and the day is hot. The woman is suffering practically because of her exclusion from the normal way of living in her society. This mutual vulnerability leads them to engage in quite a lengthy dialogue (*verses 9-26*). What is noticeable is how authentic this dialogue seems to be... it too has the mark of vulnerability... where it 'ends up' does not seem to be predetermined but results from a genuine conversation of two people, both of whom are willing on the one hand to confront each other – but at the same time be open to the possibility of being changed themselves.

Does inter faith dialogue really demand an attitude of vulnerability on our part? How far are we really prepared to allow ourselves to be so vulnerable? How far is it appropriate that we should?

One of the ways in which Jesus 'liberates' the woman he meets is by being willing to hold a serious discussion with her. In a culture in which women were not expected to reflect on theological matters his willingness to engage in dialogue with her at this level was remarkable.

How seriously do we take our mission and inter faith engagement with others? Or is there sometimes a note of patronizing and unreality involved? Is there a particular role for women in mission and inter faith activity?

Two – apparently slightly contradictory – points are made by Jesus during their conversation.

- Firstly, as Jesus and the woman discuss the main religious issue that separates them, the right location of the temple, Jesus seems to be looking forward to a time when this difference will become irrelevant – because 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth'. (*John 4.24*)
- But secondly Jesus seems to be insisting on a particular priority for his own religious tradition, 'salvation is from the Jews'. (*John 4.22*)
- Perhaps a similar dilemma is felt by many who engage in inter faith dialogue today – how can we hold together our commitment to work towards a time when we have moved beyond the divisions that our different religious traditions impose upon us, and yet also find was of appropriately cherishing our own particular insights and the gift of faith that we have received?

**What is your response to the question posed in the last paragraph? What is the 'true worship' of which the Gospel is speaking? Does this enable us to worship with each other across boundaries?**

One of the interesting questions that the story implicitly poses is the possible question of a 'special relationship' between two faiths. In spite of the hostility between Jews and Samaritans there was a relationship between the two peoples – and perhaps the hostility between them was partly due to their closeness. In a recent lecture Toby Howarth made the suggestion that the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in New Testament times had certain similarities to that between Christians and Muslims today.

In the world of inter faith dialogue is there room for particular faiths eg the so-called Abrahamic faiths to have a 'special relationship'?

Linked to that is the question of the particular relationship that Christianity has with Judaism.

What does 'salvation is from the Jews'? mean in our day? And what is the link between this statement and the proclamation with which the story ends, 'This is truly the Saviour of the world.'(verse 42)

One insight that certainly seems to spring out of this story is that 'truth' is not something we can impose on others. That is not how Jesus deals with this woman. Rather the God who is 'spirit and truth' makes his presence felt by enabling people to discover and recognise truth for themselves – and then acting upon it.

**Is this an area in which evangelism and inter faith dialogue overlap?**



One of the important aspects of this story for our understanding of mission/evangelism and inter faith issues is that it is not simply Christocentric. The Father and the Spirit plays an important role in the story – both explicitly as in verses 21-24 and implicitly or symbolically – for the symbolic use of ‘water’ throughout the story clearly closely links to the link between spirit and baptism. Going back to the work of David Bosch which we commented on at the beginning – it is also notable that Bosch gives little if any place to the importance of the Spirit in his theology of mission – and it is precisely John’s Gospel, of course, where the development of the understanding of the Spirit – particularly in the Spirit’s role as Paraclete, may have important things to say both about mission/evangelism and inter faith issues. Father Michael Amaladoss commented in his lecture to us at the NIFCON consultation in Bangalore how the invitation of the Pope to the leaders of other religions to pray with him at Assisi in 1986 implicitly recognised the action of the Spirit in other religions, especially in prayer. He also referred to the role of the Holy Spirit in creation, and how the mission of God in history through the Word and the Spirit could not be limited to Palestine.

What difference does a focus on the Spirit rather than on the person of Christ make in our understanding of the dialectic between mission/evangelism and inter faith issues? Does it aid us in helping to discover them not as polarities but complementary?

Yet the cross is also central to this story – but presented with typical Johannine subtlety. The thirst that Jesus experiences at high noon in this story, echoes the thirst he will endure at noon day on the cross, and the living water he offers to the woman will eventually spring deep out of his own side (*John 7.38; 19.34*)

How can we ensure that the cross is at the heart of our faith – but presented in a way that liberates and includes rather than creates barriers between people? The picture by Fan Pu of China, which along with others can be found on the website [www.asianchristianart.org](http://www.asianchristianart.org) offers a fascinating commentary on this.

### Notes on Acts 17.16-34

The account of Paul’s engagement with Hellenistic religion and philosophy in its Athenian heartland, one of the best known passages of Acts, embodies themes in the relation between dialogue and evangelism in a number of ways – for example:

Paul’s celebrated speech on the Areopagus is clearly evangelistic in character, yet is also described by ‘dialogical’ vocabulary;

his evangelising results at the end of the chapter in a request for further dialogue;

the way in which he presents the Christian message raises sharply the issue of contested truth claims which forms a significant dimension of some forms of inter religious dialogue.

These notes aim to draw attention to these themes, and to suggest a few questions arising from them which may be of relevance for Christians seeking to commend the gospel message in our contemporary societies, which in some respects share the religious diversity and complexity of first-century Athens.

### Structure

The passage is built of two narrative cycles: 17.16-21 is a summary account of Paul’s initial engagement with the Athenians, while 17.22-34 focuses specifically on an evangelistic speech he makes at the Areopagus. Both cycles further fall into two parts – in both, the subject of the initial part is Paul himself, while in the latter part it is the Athenians who are the active subjects. This therefore gives a structure of four parts:

- Paul’s initial response to Athens (17.16–17)
- The Athenians’ initial responses to Paul (17.18–21)
- Paul’s evangelistic speech at the Areopagus (17.22–31)
- The Athenians’ responses to Paul’s speech (17.32–34)

In itself, this alternating pattern might be described as in a broad sense ‘dialogical’, in that it places emphasis on the Athenians’ response as well as Paul’s announcement. Indeed, it is notable that the words ‘speak’ and ‘listen’ are to be found in balancing pairs in each of the two cycles (17.21; 17.32).

### (A) 17.16–17: Paul’s initial response to Athens

17.17 describes Paul as 'arguing' [NRSV] in Athens with two different groups of people in two different situations – on one hand, in the synagogue 'with the Jews and the devout persons'; on the other hand, in the marketplace 'with those who happened to be there'. The verb used in relation to both is *dialegomai*, of the same root meaning as 'dialogue'. This word occurs eleven times in Acts, always with Paul as its subject, and in three contexts: (i) in the synagogue, in relation to Jews or proselytes; (ii) in 'secular' settings, in relation to Greeks and Romans; (iii) in the fellowship of the church, in relation to fellow Christians (notably in 20.9, where it describes the long sermon during which the young man Eutyches literally drops off!). In this episode in Athens, (i) and (ii) come together (as also in 19.8–9 in Ephesus), underlining the dialogical nature of Paul's engagement with Hellenistic society.

Two related points are important to note about the nature of this Pauline 'dialogue'. Firstly, it is prepared to be argumentative in style, unabashed in setting out a distinctive position and supporting this with reasoning drawn either from the Hebrew scriptures [type (i)] or from more general philosophical considerations [type (ii)]. Secondly, Paul's motivation for engaging in it is a strong awareness of religious difference – he is 'deeply distressed' by Athenian 'idolatry', which would have been repellent to him as a devout Jew. Dialogue in this situation, then, seems to be as much about probing difference as it is about establishing common ground – though the latter emphasis will also appear in the Areopagus speech.

***What is the meaning and character of 'dialogue' in the religious situation of our Christian communities?***

***What are the motivations which impel Christians to engage in dialogue with people of other beliefs?***

**(B) 17.18–21: The Athenians' initial responses to Paul**

Answering Paul's *dialegomai*, the philosophically minded among the Athenians are characterised in 17.18 as 'debating' [NRSV] with him. The verb, *sumballō*, might suggest a hostile, or at least combative, attitude – in Jesus' mini-parable of two kings, Luke even uses it for the waging of war (Lk 14.31) – but a more general sense of 'conferring' (Ac 4.15), 'meeting' (20.14), or even positively contributing through supplying helpful insight (18.27) is also present in Acts. It is clear in any case that the Athenians, as a community deeply interested in religious and philosophical questions, wish to engage with what Paul has to say. In 17.18, however, Luke points out that some of their reactions are expressed in ridicule ('babblers' – *spermologos*, 'seed-picker', Attic slang for a bird-like dawdler feeding on scraps of gossip), and others are based on misunderstanding ('preacher of foreign divinities', i.e. – as they suppose – the god *Jesus* and the goddess *Anastasis* or Resurrection).

17.21 ends the first narrative cycle with the wry comment that the Athenians 'spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new'. Athens was acknowledged as the symbolic centre in the Hellenistic world of a quest for meaning and purpose in life which might be more closely compared to 'spirituality' in the modern West rather than to 'philosophy' in a technical sense. As such, the city thrived on acting as a trading point for new ideas, and the Areopagus was one of the principal marketplaces of ideas. When the Athenians bring Paul to this hill at the heart of their city, then, they are in effect inviting him to make a sales pitch for his new 'teaching' (*didachē*: the Athenians are using the word to indicate another spiritual 'product' on offer, but elsewhere in Acts *didachē* is used specifically and exclusively of the authentic instruction of the apostles).

***How can we best describe the religious concerns of our societies, and how does the Christian message relate to these?***

***What helps and what hinders the Christian community in responding positively to a 'marketplace' of philosophies or spiritualities?***

**(C) 22–31: Paul's evangelistic speech at the Areopagus**

There has been much scholarly dispute as to whether this celebrated speech accurately reflects Paul's own preaching, or whether it rather summarises Luke's view of how the apostle would ideally have proclaimed the gospel to an educated Hellenistic audience. In any case, what is clear is that it presents a fluent and persuasive presentation of key elements of the Christian message which is 'dialogical' at least in the sense that it aims seriously to address the world view of the Greco-Roman readers of Luke-Acts, while at the same time setting before them a distinctive and challenging 'other' perspective. These two dimensions are respectively emphasised in the two parts into which the speech naturally falls: 17.22–28, and 17.29–31.

In 17.22–28, Paul speaks of God's universal presence, his immediacy to all people, and the possibility of access to him for all humans. He does so through appealing to a divinely intended pattern embedded in the cosmos, to be found not only to the natural creation but also in the order of human nationhood and culture. In specifically religious terms, he begins by praising the piety of the Athenians (17.22 – unless *deisidaimonesterōi* is taken either ironically or as negatively implying 'superstition'), and then asserting (17.23) that their cultus of an 'unknown god' involves a genuine, if imperfectly understood, worship (*eusebeō*: words from this root are always

positive in the NT) of the true God. More strikingly still, he clinches this part of his argument by apparently quoting (17.28) the works of two pagan writers (Epimenides and Aratus) in support of his teaching on the closeness and kinship of humans to this universal God. It is difficult to read these verses other than as a strong affirmation of some of the most important elements of philosophically articulated Hellenistic religiosity. The force of Paul's argument depends on a willingness to recognise an authentic experience of God within pagan spirituality.

Rather than simply affirming this 'common ground', however, Paul moves on in 17.29–31 to emphasise two points at which his message stands in contradistinction to the Athenians' spirituality: namely, repudiation of idols and belief in resurrection. These two themes are linked to one another by the motif of repentance and judgement in a way which may well have seemed tenuous to his hearers. Both points are rooted in Paul's formation as an observant Jew, and so express a cultural divide as well as a specific truth claim. Philosophical Hellenistic religion might well disparage popular iconic cults as imperfect and vulgar compared to an intellectual quest for wisdom, but it did not generally engage in a hostile polemic against 'idolatry'. On the other hand, the very concept of bodily resurrection would have been alien to a philosophical emphasis on the significance of immateriality. The two distinctive claims which Paul is making from his Jewish background, then, must have been exceptionally puzzling to his listeners formed by Hellenistic assumptions, since they would have brought together two emphases which would have seemed to them mutually incompatible.

***What theological understanding do we have of the place of other religions or beliefs within God's providence? What understanding(s) do our Christian communities have?***

***How can we present distinctive Christian claims to others while maintaining openness in dialogue?***

**(D) 32–34: The Athenians' responses to Paul's speech**

While Paul's speech naturally is held together by a tightly consistent line of argument, the second narrative cycle concludes this chapter by outlining a variety of different responses among his Athenian hearers. It is interesting to note that the most positive group, those who 'joined him and became believers' are mentioned last, almost as an afterthought, and appear to be fairly few in number: two people are named, 'and others with them' (17.34). By contrast, the immediate reaction of many – particularly to Paul's mention of the resurrection of the dead – is, predictably, to 'scoff' (17.32a). The impression given, perhaps surprisingly after such an impressive speech, is that Paul's evangelism at Athens was not particularly successful in its results.

However, between those who accept Paul's message and those who reject it, there is a third group of Athenians mentioned in 17.32b: those who say 'We will hear you again about this'. These are people who are desirous of further and deeper dialogue. It is rather startling that it is at this point (17.33) that Paul leaves; the start of the next chapter finds him moved on to Corinth (18.1). Perhaps this suggests that on this occasion he recognised that he himself was not particularly equipped for this kind of sustained intellectual engagement, or that he did not see it as a priority within his apostolic work. On the other hand, in Ephesus Paul continued in 'dialoguing' for two years – including, presumably, an engagement with philosophically minded Greeks in the 'lecture hall of Tyrannus' (19.9-10). In any case, as it Paul's speech at Areopagus which led directly to this third group's request, it is possible to say that, in this case at least, the (potential) opening up of religious dialogue is presented as being a direct consequence of evangelism.

***Should continuing dialogue be seen as a positive consequence of evangelism in inter faith contexts, or is dialogue a preparatory stage for evangelism?***

***Is dialogue a particular vocation for certain individuals or groups within the Christian community?***