

Today in our service we focus upon world mission and as we do so a couple of things come to my mind and the first is what do we mean by the world and what is our mission in the world.

So often when we think of the world we think of the globe with the many countries that make up that globe and that is how sometimes it is used in the Bible. However when we come to John's gospel and his letters the word has a different meaning.

The word world appears 216 times in the NIV and 95 of them are in John's writing. Here in the verses we look at this morning the word is used 6 times and, while in the first use there in v13, where Jesus said, "I say these things while I am still in the world", Jesus may well be meaning the physical world, in most of the others the meaning is different. Look with me at one example in v14, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world." Now if they are not part of the physical world we can only presume that they are aliens, but we know that his disciples were humans born in Israel so what does he mean?

Basically in John the word world means the human society that rejects God. This is why Jesus says he is not of the world for in his life he honoured and obeyed God and by responding to his call these disciples had come into the kingdom of God as opposed to the kingdom of this world.

But if that is the nature of the world, if you and I have as it says in Col 1:13, been "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves", then what should be our attitude to and our relationship with the world in all its rebellion and lostness?

Well I think in these verses we see three possibilities, two of which Jesus rejects and one of which he endorses.

Not out of the world

Firstly he told the disciples they were not to be out of the world, v15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." This is always a temptation for Christians. We can find the world a difficult place to be. Unfortunately for Gayle Williams working in Afghanistan this week she saw just how hostile a place. It won't be like that for most of us but many of you know how in the work environment or at school the name of Jesus can be abused, your faith mocked and undermined. It is not surprising that we may be tempted to withdraw. Through the ages that is what Christians have done, be it into monasteries or into our evangelical ghettos. In our church groups we are safe from the world. But as we see here, that's not what Jesus would have us do. More than that we see that Jesus was very much in the world. He left the glory of heaven to enter in our world. Then in the world he didn't withdraw for here was the one who was seen amongst those on the margins of society, associated with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. We are not to take ourselves out of the world even though we find it hostile and alien.

Not of the world

Secondly they were not to be of the world. So in v16, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." The danger Jesus knew for his followers was that if they were in the world that they would simply be assimilated into the world and lose their distinctiveness. Jesus had called them to be salt and light but the danger is that we lose that cutting edge and take on the attitudes of the world. We know how easy that is don't we? How easy it is to have the same attitude towards possessions and wealth, towards ambition, towards sexuality and many other things as the world around us. The world presses on us and squeezes us into its mould so that we conform rather than stand out. In a situation such as faces the Christians in Mosul in Iraq at the moment where many have been forced out of their homes how tempting it must be simply to fit in with the Moslem world around them. But when you are in the office and everyone is griping about the manager how easy to fit in rather than stand out. Not in the world and not of the world but what Jesus did say to his disciples was that

Go into the world

thirdly they were to go into the world, v18, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." Here the mission of Jesus becomes a model for the mission of his disciples. In the same way that he was "sent" by the father his followers are "sent" into the world. He came, it was incarnational, so we as we go into the world are to be incarnational. We go into the world as followers and ambassadors of Christ.

For some that will be cross cultural, soaking in the language and culture of the country they go to. But we don't have to go out of our own country to cross cultures, we can easily meet those who come from other countries or those whose culture is very different because they are poor or young or into different things than we are. Also while we go with our physical presence we also go with our prayers. As we have been reminded today we go into the world as we pray for that world. We do that, as we saw last week, especially as we pray for the gospel to go forward and for that church of Jesus Christ especially when that church is persecuted.

Jesus gave us an example of incarnational mission where he entered people's lives in order to share his love. "Mission," said John Stott, "was an essential part of Jesus' identity." Similarly it should be part of ours if we are his followers.

There is a big world out there and a world that is in rebellion and lost to God. It needs to see and hear the good news of Jesus. It will not do that if we opt out of the world. Nor will it see and hear that good news if we become assimilated into the world. But if we take seriously Jesus words that we are sent into the world so that we open ourselves to go into that rebellious and lost world be it into an overseas setting or more locally then in and through us the world has a chance to see and hear of God's love and grace. Jesus words, "I have sent them into the world." What is God saying to you through those words today?