



Images of Mission in the New Testament

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Most missionary sermons and missiology statements start from the text of Matthew 28,19: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations", a text echoing the ancient Vulgate translation: "Go and teach all nations".

It certainly is a good starting point. It is impressive and significant that the Gospel concludes with a sending to Mission: Jesus' concern becomes the Mission's concern. The Good News of the Resurrection is lived out by a call to share the joy it communicates. This joy constitutes the power inherent in the Gospel (Rm. 1,16) and gives to the Church its identity and its dynamism.¹ For the past twenty centuries this text has mobilized astounding missionary energies and it would be disparaging to empty it of its substance in the name of exegesis.

However, it is always dangerous to fix upon one text and one image only. There are four gospels and what gives strength to Jesus' command to Mission is precisely the convergence of the different texts in these four books. Not only Matthew, but also Mark, Luke and John end their Gospels with the missionary commandment.² We can say, therefore, that it is not one text from one gospel which by chance institutes the Mission, but many texts from all four gospels. They all have the same conclusion: Mission is the continuation of the Good News and the repercussion of the Paschal event all over the world.

(I) 'MISSION' IN THE RESURRECTION NARRATIONS

1). Mark and Itinerant Mission

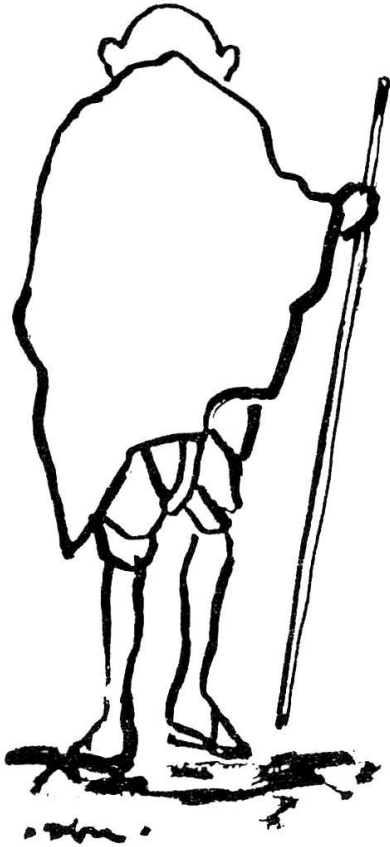
In fact Mark 16,15 expresses more clearly what one would like to find in Matthew 28,19, namely, the call to foreign mission. Leaving aside the problems of textual criticism regarding the long conclusion of Mark, we recognize that Mark 16,15 totally coincides with the line of the Good News according to Mark and expresses perfectly the characteristics of the classical image of Mission: the leaving of one's home ("go"), universality ("in the whole world"), reaching cosmic dimensions ("to every creature"), evangelical action reduced to its basic form ("announce": keruxate in Greek), and rendering the announcement in its most essential terms ("the Good News").

2). Matthew and the teaching Mission

Matthew 28,19 presents an image of Mission which does not correspond exactly to the meaning generally given to it.

The "Go" in the Greek scripture passage is a participle only. Some exegetes even say it is a semitism and has an auxiliary meaning (like biblical expressions such as: he got up and went; he went and resided; he went and met etc...) At any rate, the important verb in the sentence is: make, "make disciples". The verb, peculiar to Matthew (except in Acts 14,21) reflects the 'rabbinical' aspect of Jesus' ministry which for Matthew, the well initiated Scribe of the Kingdom of Heaven (13,51), was of great interest. Jesus is the Master, who imparts his teaching to the Twelve considered to be his first disciples. For the latter to become masters and make disciples in their turn, a long time of slow initiation is required. It supposes a "scribal" activity of meditation upon the Scriptures, read anew in the light of the "Good News"; this activity suggests a professional chair or at least a sitting master, rather than an impetus to go from country to country. In this context,

the participle "having gone," be it a semitism or not, can have a relative value only.



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church.*

However, it would not be air to say that this sedentary attitude is in opposition to Mission. It is rather the expression of the missionary experience in the Matthean churches. Matthew and his milieu had decided, in order to evangelize, the announcement of Good News was not sufficient. It was necessary, rather, to initiate and to form. Not everyone was a St. Paul or Francis Xavier, in perpetual motion. It would not be good if all apostles were like them. Masters, gurus, formers, like Matthew, were also needed. This is what is suggested by Matthew 28,19.

3). Luke and the Witnessing Mission

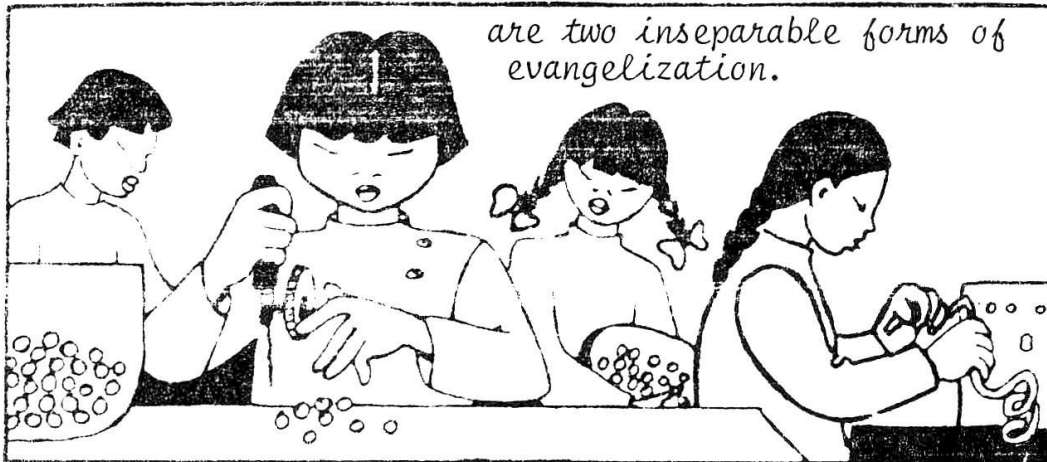
We find a slight difference in Luke's Gospel: "You are witnesses" (24,48). "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses" (Acts, 1,8).

In Acts 2, Luke describes the life that constitutes this witness inspired by the Holy Spirit. When on Pentecost Day, the Spirit descended upon the Twelve gathered together, Peter addressed the crowd. He spoke (2,14-36): the word was the first form of testimony, the first step in bearing witness. Three thousand people were baptized.

But chapter two doesn't end with Peter's sermon. A community is set up and in it the power of the Spirit is manifested through "many miracles and signs" (2,43) through the lives of the faithful. "They lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared... (2,44-45) in an atmosphere of joy, prayer and thanksgiving." They went to the Temple as a body, met in their houses

for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone..." (2, 46,47) They attracted people who came and asked for baptism:" Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved" (2,47).

Bearing witness and verbal proclamation



The power of the Spirit manifested itself through the "word" and through the life and action of a community. This is the Lucan form of Mission. Luke, the theologian of the Church, knows that the Gospel is not only Word: it incarnates itself in a Community that becomes the vehicle and the living expression of the "Word".³ It can be said that "Evangelii Nuntiandi" is totally Lucan when it says that bearing witness and verbal proclamation are two inseparable forms of evangelization.⁴

4). Luke and John and the Transforming Mission

Another aspect of Luke's missionary mandate: that of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" which is to be preached to 'all the nations' (Luke 24,47) is also found in John.⁵

In John 20,21, the Eleven are sent as Jesus himself was sent: "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." They received the Holy Spirit in order to expand the experience of the forgiveness of sins: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven: for those whose sins you retain, they are retained". This must not only be understood as the institution of the Sacrament of Penance. The charismatic movement has helped to rediscover the transfiguring experience of the forgiveness of sins. It is an inwardly perceived new life with all its liberating impact. To announce and communicate the new life as described by Luke and John is definitely Mission work. And yet

the proposed image is somewhat different. The aim of Mission is the inner discovery of a new heart created in us by the Holy Spirit⁶ since the origin of mission is the very Heart of God ("As the Father has sent me...")

The four evangelists are in substantial agreement on the fundamental reality of Mission. The Resurrection of Christ is not only a founding event. It lives in the voice, the life, and the heart of the Church. Resurrection and Mission cannot be disassociated from one another.

At the same time, from the manner in which the texts are formulated, we become aware of different experiences, and already images of Mission are sketched which will continue throughout the history of the Church. These images vary in accordance with the charism of persons and communities and because of circumstances, but they all converge in the fundamental connection with the force of the Gospel and the power of the Risen Christ.

(II) MISSION IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

When one reads Matthew 28,19 from the point of view of Mark, one readily sees that the Acts of the Apostles is a putting into effect of this marching order. Acts 1,8, draws a clearly formulated plan: "Not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the world." The following chapters show the putting into effect of this plan. Père Jenny, writing for the Equipes Enseignantes entitled his book, "On the Roads of the World," as a sort of reference to this plan.

Here again we find an unconscious simplifying process. Acts 1,8 gives the scheme of a book as much as it gives the plan of a campaign. In the first part of this book, JERUSALEM holds primary place: twelve chapters out of the twenty eight that make up the book, twelve chapters which chronologically cover about 15 years (from 30 to 45, the approximate dates of St. Paul's first mission).

Moreover, the final part of the programme: "to the ends of the world" is realised by the prisoner Paul. The account of Paul's captivity covers eight chapters (21 to 28). It is his captivity that brought Paul to Rome where he preached freely for two years (28, 29-30): the plan is fulfilled, the testimony has been carried to the ends of the earth. But it is not apostolic planning that leads Paul to the ends of the earth. He eventually went to Rome because of his arrest and the inertness of the

Roman administration, which adopted procrastinating tactics when faced with a difficult case. The planned apostolic campaign covers only ten chapters out of twenty-eight. The remaining chapters certainly say something about Mission and Witness, but in a different way. What is it?

1). The Mission in Jerusalem

The Jerusalem Bible sets a great division at the beginning of chapter six which it titles: The First Missions. The title is good in the sense that in Chapter six appears a group of men who are going to play an important role in the foreign Mission. It is the group of SEVEN, representing the Hellenists (i.e. probably Jews of the Hellenist diaspora). Chapter eight of Acts shows them dispersing to Judea and Samaria (8,11). This dispersion, bearer of the Good News, will reach as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (11,19).

We can, however, question the title given to this part of Acts by the Jerusalem Bible for:

- a) one remains in Jerusalem until the end of chapter 7.
- b) The title gives the impression that everything which happened up to that time was not missionary work. This assertion is contrary to Luke's point of view. For Luke, the preaching of the Gospel in Jerusalem is real mission, and even preeminently mission. If we want to understand the meaning of this stage, we must first ponder a problem often avoided by the biblical theology of Mission.

At the time of the Resurrection, the Eleven had apparently received the order to announce the Good News to all nations. But it seems they do nothing about this order. Even after they have received the Holy Spirit, they remain where they are, making only one trip to Samaria when forced by circumstances (8,15). If Peter "visits one place after another" (9,32) it is only an apostolic journey. It is understood that "the Apostles" will remain in Jerusalem where Peter himself has his See (11,1-2). Such is the situation even at the time of the 1st Council of Jerusalem, around the year 48 (Act. 15).

What does all this mean? Were the Apostles cowardly men who for nearly 20 years dared not make a start "on the roads of the world"? Were they like soldiers in an opera marking time as they sing "here we go, here we go" without leaving the stage until the curtain is dropped? Had this been the Apostles' psychology, one can hardly imagine Luke painting in Acts a picture of this pusillanimity. Nothing permits one to

believe that Luke has constructed the first fifteen chapters of Acts as a counter-testimony. If he insists on the fact that the Apostles remain in Jerusalem, it certainly must have a meaning. If the Apostles did it, they certainly did not have the impression of wasting their time.

B. Gerhardssohn has explained well the meaning of the presence of the Apostles in Jerusalem.

He makes a thorough analysis of the Judaic background of Acts and shows that the Twelve worked as a body whose function was to "sit" as a college. Had not the Lord declared that "they would sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel"?⁷ Their role was not to be sharpshooters dispersed throughout the world.

Yet, Gerhardssohn's description stops short when he sees in this college only a sort of rabbinic group, whose function for the most part is to explain the Scriptures in the light of the tradition received from Jesus. The Apostles may of course have had this function, but they were certainly not a Sanhedrin. Their presence in Jerusalem is evangelizing. The Acts are explicit on this subject and we have no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the picture they give. The body of the Twelve does not function as a rabbinic council, but as an apostolic and missionary body.

But then why did they restrict their activity to Jerusalem? Was it with the intention of laying strong foundations by creating a well trained community, out of which later expansion would be possible? One knows the value of this tactic. The "later" may well never arrive. The basic community will never be perfect until the time it turns towards others. What then? Was it pusillanimity or lack of apostolic imagination?

2). Jesus

The problem becomes more complicated when one notes that Jesus had the same attitude as that adopted by the Twelve. He did not go to the Nations either. His ministry was carried out in a quite limited area: a few villages around Lake Gennesaret, a missionary area probably smaller than many of ours. Jesus did not go to Tiberias, which was being built at this time. He did not preach in Sephoris, the administrative capital of Galilee located only a few miles from Nazareth. He was still less seen at Ptolemais⁸ the local harbour which was opened to the whole world. Add to all this the few strange words of Jesus in Matthew 10,5-6 and 15,24-26 and we can come to the conclusion that Jesus was lacking missionary consciousness, or can we?

Some writers have said so, Harnack for example. Others, like Sundkler⁹ and Jeremias¹⁰ have shown that interest in Israel and universalism are not mutually exclusive.

In the Old Testament, universalism was generally of a centripetal kind. In Isaiah chapter sixty, the nations come to Sion attracted by the light shining in the darkness. Here in verses 1 to 5 we find one of the most expressive statements of this idea. This light, in fact, is God Himself:

"Yahweh will be your everlasting light,
Your God will be your splendor."¹¹ (v. 19)

The same model constitutes the background of the universalism of the Gospels: "Many will come from east and west to take their places with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 8,11; cf Luke 13,29). John 11,50-52 has the same meaning. Other texts evoke the eschatological universalism of the gathering (Mt. 13,26; 25,32; 24,31). If one accepts a suggestion of Von Rad, the light that shines on the mountain (Mt 5,14) is the eschatological Jerusalem whose light, which is the glory of God, draws all Nations in their eschatological pilgrimage towards the city of God.¹²

From this perspective it appears that "missionary work is part of the final accomplishment; it is a divine demonstration in action, of the Son of God's exaltation, an eschatology in the process of being accomplished".¹³

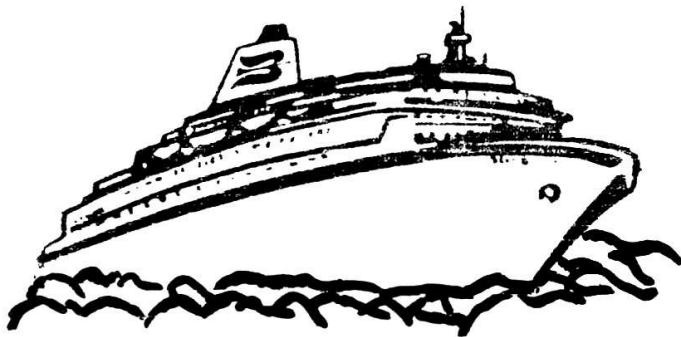
If this was the missionary model adopted by Jesus - and it is the only one that can explain his "strategy" - one cannot consider it an outdated or secondary model, suiting a period of apostolic pusillanimity. It rather is the basic model from which other types of missionary attitudes proceed. In fact this image of Mission questions us who represent the Pauline type of "missioning mission". This kind of eschatological gathering type of mission leads us to pose several questions.

3). Questions

a) Mission is gathering. Recruiting is not its ultimate end, nor is baptism; its aim is the creation of communities of prayer and fraternal love. Let us note that Acts 2, which constitutes a kind of synthesis of apostolic activity, does not end with the baptism of 3,000 people; it continues with the picture of a community that prays and participates in the Eucharist, the source in its turn of all missionary dynamism (Acts.

2,47b). And let us not forget John 17,21: "May they all be one. Father may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you so that the world may believe it was you who sent me." This is also a great missionary text, on the same level as Matthew 28,19.

b) Have we not over emphasized the itinerant Mission (the mission of movement)? The evangelization of Europe was mainly accomplished by monks who, in a certain manner, continued the centripetal type of Mission.



Have we not over emphasized the itinerant Mission?

Consider India for example. I wonder if Evangelization - and the church born of it - is not marked in an overly exclusive manner by an activist mission carried on by congregations and missionary societies of the active type. Perhaps it is not undergirded enough by an evangelical presence of the centripetal form, giving forth light which shines by itself. Without contesting the treasures of generosity and sanctity of the modern Mission, one may ask however why, from the 16th century onwards, monasticism lost its primary place in Mission and if, as a consequence, missionary strategy has not more or less become tainted with Pelagianism. Here, in Lyon we can recall the memory of Père Jules Monchanin, and meditate on how he saw the role of his ashram at Sachinatanda.

c) The place of Israel in mission. Another question posed by a universalism centred in Jerusalem is the place of Israel in mission. To my Indian point of view, I confess that I was at first shocked when I read the report of a meeting of eminent exegetes which stated: "In order of significance, the return of Israel is not on the same level as the conversion of the Mongols."¹⁴ This makes light of the Mongol people who played such an important role in Asian history and therefore in the world.

I wondered what the Nestorian missionaries and John de Monte

Corvino, the apostles of Mongolia, who nearly changed the course of history by the conversion of a "yellow Clovis", would have thought of such a declaration. And yet, St. Paul himself tells us that the Israelites "are as chosen people loved by God for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice" (Rom 11, 28-29). The New Testament as a whole continues to look at Israel as the chosen People. Can we make light of this in our missionary vision? And what about Israel, the first cousin of Israel, the Islam which continues to witness to the same faith as Abraham?

Mission is setting out but Mission also is return to the Centre: evangelization in the form of rapid proclamation in the manner of Mark, Paul and today's sects, but also in the form of community witness as in Luke and the long and deep training process of the disciple as conceived by Matthew.

We should also add other New Testament images of Mission such as Mission through diaspora, derived from apparently social and political trials like in Acts 8,1, and Mission in the form of a dialogue like that of Paul speaking in the Areopagus in Acts 17 nor should we forget the eschatological Mission of the Angels at the end of time.

As we have seen, the Bible presents a great range of types of Mission. At the same time, it is not said that Mission has to be limited to these types. The Bible is not a treatise on methods. Throughout the ages, Mission has had, and may still discover, other ways of announcing the Gospel. At the beginning of this seminar it seems a good thing to recall this variety of spirit not only in order to avoid blockages, but also to pose questions to ourselves and thereby allow the Spirit to open other perspectives to us.

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) cf. Evangelii Nuntiandi 14, 15.
- (2) Mark 16:15, Luke 24: 47-48 and John 20: 21-22.
- (3) Acts 6:7, 12: 24, 19: 20.
- (4) Evangelii Nuntiandi 41, 42.
- (5) cf. Acts 2:38.
- (6) cf. Ps 51: 10-11.
- (7) cf. Luke 22: 30f, Mt 19: 28.
- (8) Akko, St. John of Acre.
- (9) "Jesus and the Pagans", RHTP 1936, pp. 462-499.
- (10) Jesu Verheissung für die Völker Stuttgart, 1956; Jesus: the Promise for All Peoples.
- (11) The same scheme is found in Is 2: 2-4 (Mic 4: 1-3), 42: 1 - 4: 6, 45: 14-17, 55: 3-5; Jer 12: 15-16, 16: 19-21; Soph 3: 9-10; Zac 2: 15; 8: 20-23, 14: 9-16; Ps 87.
- (12) Gesammelte Studien, pp. 214-224.
- (13) Jeremias, op. cit., English edition p. 75.
- (14) Die Israelfrage Nach Rom 9-11, Rome 1877, p. 179.