GETTING THE CART AND THE HORSE IN THE RIGHT ORDER

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No, mission isn't the highest priority for the church, whatever the inspirational posters say.
Category: Mission

My social media feeds are full of inspirational quotes about mission. Generally, these are the sorts of things that can be matched to a background photograph of trees, mountains or a sunset to make a really cool poster. I've never been very good at coming up with these sorts of quotes, which is probably why I'm not a million-selling author. In fact, not only can I not come up with my own quotes, I spend a fair bit of time critiquing exciting statements by other people.

One of the things that you will often see on these quotes about mission are words to the effect that mission (or missions) is the most urgent task facing the church today. I beg to differ.

People will point to the Great Commission verses in Matthew 28 and say that these are the last words that Jesus said to his disciples, so we must take them seriously. Yes, we must take them seriously, but the key is that they are the last words recorded in Matthew's Gospel; there is an awful lot of important stuff that you have to read before you get to the bit about 'going into the world'. Try the Sermon on the Mount for starters.

The key is that we must read Matthew 28 in the context of the whole of the Gospel of Matthew (and we must read Matthew in the context of the whole of Scripture, but that's another post). Jumping straight in at Chapter 28 and saying that we have to get on with making disciples misses the whole point. World mission was not Jesus highest priority. He spent three years teaching and training his disciples before he sent them off into the world.

In the Great Commission Jesus says that we should teach people to obey everything that he taught. This means that missionaries have to understand Jesus teaching before they have anything to offer the wider world. Understanding doesn't just mean knowing what Jesus taught and why, it means obeying his teaching, having a life transformed by it.

At this point, the mission enthusiasts will complain that I'm saying that people should sit at home and learn, while a needy world waits to hear about Jesus. Wrong! Missionaries who are not transformed by Jesus teaching have nothing to offer the world anyway and would be better advised to stay at home and those who have truly absorbed what Jesus is saying will go out into the world to speak about him - you won't be able to stop them. Our problem, is that all too often, we've settled for an anaemic, personal Jesus rather than radical, world-altering, crucified and risen Messiah of the Bible.

Getting to grips with Jesus is the highest priority for the Church. When we get that right, mission will happen anyway.