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Hello. Welcome to this edition of the St. Andrew's, Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. In this episode, we're going to be thinking about three specific principles that should really underpin our mission activity as a church if we want to be effective in mission. Now, of course, there's so much to be said about this topic and we can't possibly cover it all in one episode. Um, it's not as if these are the only three principles that we need to think about when we go out in mission. There's loads of principles of course, but what I want to do today is just to offer some initial thoughts and we're going to be having other episodes to develop this thinking in the near future. But for now I just want to spend a bit of time exploring these three principles for effective mission by looking at a passage from the Acts of the Apostles, from Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 32, which is the passage where Paul is preaching in Athens.

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And I think it's a really fascinating passage about going out in mission in a society where there are so many competing claims for God. Now mission is a big word. It covers a whole range of activities. And a lot of the mission that we undertake is done, uh, of course through our actions. Uh, when we offer pastoral support or when we make collections for our local Foodbank for example, or the work that we do with young people and children and so on. But of course we, we do mission through our words as well, by actually telling people who Jesus is and what the Christian faith is all about and what difference God has made in our lives. And we are all called to this aspect of mission. So I wonder when was the last time you shared the Christian faith with someone, not in actions but in words?

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Um, when did you last tell somebody about God's love? When did you last tell someone about what difference being a Christian has made in your life? Because all of us have a story to tell. We've all got experiences to share and telling other people about the love of God is part of what it means to follow Jesus. And sometimes it can seem like a scary idea, can't it? to actually tell other people about Jesus because, um, we may think that we, we don't know our Bible well enough or we might not be well versed enough in theology or we are perhaps frightened that we might get a question to which we don't know the answer. But in reality, most people aren't really that interested in deep theological debate or the answer to difficult questions. Most people are just interested in why you come to church and what difference that makes to you.

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Most people are interested in why you are a follower of Jesus and what difference that makes in your life. And I'm sure that we can all answer those questions if we give them a bit of thought in advance. So sharing your faith I think is actually really easy, and actually I think it's far easier to share our faith now than it has been for anytime in the last few hundred years. And that's for, um, a few reasons. Firstly, because most people, in the UK at least, are so unchurched. They're so far removed from the church that if you talk to them about the church, they're genuinely inquisitive. They're genuinely interested. I know that this podcast has listeners in many countries and, uh, each one of our

situations are very different. I know that, but it may be the same for you, um, as it is for us here in the UK that we are now into a third generation of people who do not come to church.

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And, uh, most people have no idea what we do or why we do it. So there is actually a genuine interest when we talk about it. And secondly, I think more than for a very long time, there's a, there's a genuine hunger for spirituality in our nation and in the wider world. There's a real desire to understand faiths. And that's come about for two very different reasons. Uh, the desire to understand different faiths is partly because religion is on the front page of our newspapers most days; for good reasons, but sadly more often for bad reasons. As I record this podcast, we're just a few weeks past the horrific attacks on the mosques in New Zealand in which so many innocent and beautiful people died. And that terrible incident is one example of why religion is so much a part of our daily discourse in the world. But also there's a genuine hunger for spirituality in our nation and across the world because people are so busy, they're so stressed that they will actively look for spiritual input that makes a real difference in their lives.

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We know that Mindfulness apps are some of the most used on mobile phones. Um, prayer retreats, meditation retreats are on the increase. Um, silence is a valuable commodity that people are hungering for in a very noisy, fast moving world. And so we have the opportunity to share our faith with people who are desperately looking for spirituality that has meaning. They're not interested so much in just ideas or doctrines or concepts so much as expressions of faith that make a real difference to daily living. So I would encourage you to seize the moments that you have to tell others about your faith and the difference that God makes in your lives. Uh, because people really want to know. And there's a real similarity between our situation and that which we, uh, encounter in this passage from Acts 17, um, with Paul when he went to Athens, because like our society today, Athens at that time was, uh, was a melting pot of religious and spiritual ideas and practices.

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Uh, there's one historian has written that at that time, "It was easier to find a god in Athens than a man". And, I think in some sense that was true. There were, there were temples and statues and religious idols on every street. The people of Athens worshiped all sorts of gods, including Athena, of course, and Zeus, um, Mars, the gods called Jupiter, Venus and Mercury and the gods, Neptune and Diana. And every way you went in Athens, there were people undertaking religious practices and hungering after spiritual experience. And that's undoubtedly the same for you, of course, whatever your context, wherever you live. We're living in a world of, um, pluralistic context where those of different faiths, those of different worldviews are living in close proximity and building community together. Living in London as I do um, I think it's one of the things that makes this city so vibrant and so alive, so exciting. Uh, it's a melting pot of ideas and cultures and every day feels like a school day for me as I learn from those people around me in the various cultures in this amazing city. And of course, living in a diverse environment gives us plenty of opportunity for sharing

the gospel of Jesus with others. And that's what Paul recognized when he went to Athens. So how did Paul respond to those people of other faiths and also those of no faith? And what approach can we take today?

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Well, the three principles that I want to think about in this podcast that should underpin our mission as a church if we want to be effective, are all themselves founded on, um, one simple truth, which is this, that Paul did not judge those to whom he was speaking. He was never rude. He wasn't hostile or aggressive or confrontational. Instead, he approached those from other faiths with humility and respect. And his opening words, um, in Acts 17 verse 22, uh, his opening words to the people of Athens, uh, clearly reflected that. He said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." Um, he showed them respect, he acknowledged their spirituality. Now that may seem like a really obvious thing to do, but sadly the history of the church doesn't always reflect that. Instead, Christians have very often gone into situations with arrogance and disrespect as if we have all the answers and all other faiths are just ignorant.

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Um, the idea behind so much missionary activity through the years and the behavior, sadly of so many Christians today is, is to not listen, but just talk as if to say, "Well, Jesus is the answer. Now, what's your question?" And that is so disrespectful, of course. If we want to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to engage with people as people and not just as potential converts. We need to engage with our community where it's at, not where we wish it would be. Genuine Christian mission does not patronize people. Um, it's more willing to listen and learn than it is to speak. So from this passage, I then just want to draw out three, um, quick principles about effective mission and how we can learn from Paul's approach here.

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Well, the first principle for effective mission is that if we want to, um, be successful in mission, we need to understand the community in which we are located. This passage from Acts 17 suggests that Paul, um, spent a lot of time just wandering around the city, looking at what was going on in the streets, entering the synagogues, listening to the debates, checking out the street speakers and the philosophers and the preachers. And then when he got a feel for the community, he was able to preach the gospel effectively. Now, wherever you live, um, you may have lived there for many, many years and you might argue that you know your location really well already. And perhaps to a large extent you do. Um, but I would gently ask whether you feel that you really know the place where you live or do you just know those aspects and people groups that you actually engage with?

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That's a different thing. Um, it's not a judgment, it's just a fact that we, we tend to mix with a particular group of people and we know that group really well and thereby we think we know our town or our city well. But in reality, um, we just know our take on where we live. For me as a parish priest, it's actually surprisingly difficult for me to get to know the place where I live because most

of my week is spent doing church things or talking to people about God and faith. And so I tend to live in a bubble that doesn't actually reflect my parish as a whole. And you probably have your own bubble too. Perhaps that's because you spend an awful lot of time with the parents in the school playground for example. Um, or the people you meet at your church or down the gym or in the pub or the group of people you work with or whatever.

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Um, we all tend to live in a social bubble that is not completely reflective of the place where we live. And so for myself, I have to be really, really proactive in getting out of my bubble in order to actually listen to the community and to learn what is going on outside of my bubble. And I've a few different ways of doing that. So, uh, for example, um, once a week at least, um, I go to McDonald's and I just sit and I listen and I watch what goes on around me. And the community that I see in there is so different from the community in my own social bubble. Now I say McDonald's, but to be commercially fair, I obviously need to note that there are other fast food establishments available, of course! Um, I also, uh, follow community forums on Facebook and Twitter to try to learn about what the real concerns are in this parish and not just what people tell me because I am the Vicar. Um, it's hard work for us all to really get to know our community. But the success of our mission as a church depends on it, of course. We need to get to know our community so that when we tell people about Jesus, we're, we're speaking into their real needs and we're not just answering the questions that we think they should be asking.

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Secondly, if we want to be, uh, effective in mission, we need to engage with the spiritual and not just the Christian. Now this is a, um, it's a difficult one because, you know, let's be honest, none of us really like confrontation. Um, but this principle does require us to, to, um, to speak our truth into various situations. So listen to how Paul began speaking with the Athenians in this passage from Acts 17 verse 22. He says this, it says this: "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, 'People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and this is what I am going to proclaim to you!'"

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So Paul, um, commended them for their spiritual search, but he wanted to take them further into understanding the truth about God even when that conflicted with their current spiritual practice. Um, he wasn't, he wasn't prepared to just endorse what they were currently doing in order to keep the peace and avoid confrontation. And sometimes we need to say to people, um, "I admire your spiritual search. It, it's a great thing that you are seeking after truth. But let me tell you where that truth is to be found. And it's not in the way you are currently living." Now it's tough because we don't want to be seen as judgemental. But we do have a gospel to proclaim and there are spiritual practices that just do not sit easily with the Christian faith. And we need to somehow, with respect and gentleness and kindness, um, we need to engage with these and show a better way. Yes, we, you know, we do need to approach people with respect

and understanding and humility, but we do have to be faithful to our call and we do need to gently explain what the Christian faith is all about um, so that others can then make their own judgment about whether or not they too want to follow Jesus. We must always speak the truth. But we must always speak the truth with respect and kindness.

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So firstly, then we need to get to know our community better. Secondly, we need to engage with the spiritual and not just the Christian. And thirdly, and finally, we need to understand that, um, if we want to be effective, um, that mission is about going out, uh, not expecting people to always come to us. Um, think about the method of mission that Jesus employed. Um, he never called a single disciple in the synagogue, did he? Instead, he called all of his disciples from the place where they were working or where they were having a party or where they lived. Um, Jesus went out to them into their everyday places and he called them to faith there. And Paul was the same. Um, he often started in the synagogue, just like Jesus, but then he went out into the streets and the houses and proclaimed the gospel there.

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And that's what we see in this passage from Acts, of course. Paul out and about in the streets of Athens, talking about God. He went to where the people were gathering rather than waiting for them to come to him. And if we want to grow stronger and more effective in our mission as a church, um, we need to be out there rather than expecting people to always come to us. Some churches, um, have so many activities, so many meetings, so many groups that members of the congregation are constantly in church or spending their whole, um, non-working time in church activities. Uh, they hardly have any time to go out there and be with others. And I don't think that's how church should be. I think that we should have an absolute minimum amount of meetings. We should have an absolute minimum amount of activities. And what we should be about is actually resourcing people to take God out there into their everyday lives rather than constantly trying to gather people together, um, for another Committee Meeting or another Working Party or another Prayer Meeting or another social event. Church, um, this is maybe a poor analogy,

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Um, I think, you know what I mean, church in one sense it should be like a petrol station, um, where you, you come and you fill up and then you drive away. You drive off the forecourt, um, to get back out there about your daily business, to live your life in the power and the energy of God. The Christian work, the Christian mission, is done out there and church is the filling station, if you like, where we, um, get resourced and energized to do the work of mission out there in the world. Uh, so we need to get out there into our communities with the Gospel and not just wait for people to come to us.

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So then we can learn a lot from Paul's experience in Athens, uh, in developing these three principles to underpin effective mission as a church. Uh, firstly we must get to know our community better. Secondly, we must engage with the spiritual and not just the Christian. And thirdly, we've got to get out there into the world and not just wait for people to join us. In this way, we will be

following the example of Jesus. We will be following the example of Paul and we can really make a difference in the world. We can really make a difference in our community for God, which ultimately is what we are all about as a church. So I, uh, hope that you found this podcast helpful. If you've got any comments or feedback, then please do contact me by email, steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Um, check out, uh, check out the church website, uh, standrewsenfield.com. Our Facebook page is St Andrew's Enfield. Please do tell others about these podcasts so that we can continue to grow together as a learning community. And of course, do make sure that you subscribe to the podcast too. Uh, so wherever you are today, whatever you're doing, I hope that you have a really great day and a deep sense of God's blessing on your life.

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Bye.