# What on Earth are we doing here?

## Introduction

God has created each one of us for purpose. Right from the beginning, humanity was given a role in God’s creation. This role is in two parts: to **fill** the earth and to **subdue** it (Genesis 1:28). In other words, we were given the responsibility, not only of multiplying, but also of stewarding the earth on God’s behalf. The first one we have fulfilled in abundance (there are more than 1 billion people in India alone); the second one we have not done so well.

Almost half the world — over three billion people — live on less than £2.25 a day. At least 80% of humanity lives on less than £8 a day. More than 80 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where income differentials are widening. The poorest 40 percent of the world’s population accounts for 5 percent of global income. The richest 20 percent accounts for three-quarters of world income. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty. And they die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation.

It has long been feared that human activity is causing massive extinctions. Despite increased efforts at conservation, it has not been enough and biodiversity losses continue. The polar caps are melting at an alarming rate due to global warming affecting the polar ecosystem and especially wild life such as polar bears. The climate is changing. The earth is warming up, and there is now overwhelming scientific consensus that it is happening, and human-induced. With global warming on the increase and species and their habitats on the decrease, chances for ecosystems to adapt naturally are diminishing. Many are agreed that climate change may be one of the greatest threats facing the planet. Recent years show increasing temperatures in various regions, and/or increasing extremities in weather patterns. All this is happening regardless of what Donald Trump or the conservative evangelicals in America tell you.

All of that illustrates the negative impact of living in a fallen world where people and nations live selfish lives. However, that is not what we were created for.

Made in God’s image and likeness, we were commissioned to take his glory into every part of the earth so that the earth could reflect his glory. However, through the Fall, the image of God has been marred. It is still there but it has become corrupted through sin and we see the consequences in the world all around us. The purpose of redemption is to restore in us the image of God so that we can once more fulfil the original mandate that God gave to us to fill the earth with his glory and to look after the world on his behalf.

At present, we live in the now / not yet of God’s purposes. Redeemed humanity lives in the midst of a Fallen world. One day, Jesus is going to return to complete the job, but in the meantime, it is up to his church to reflect the glory of God in a corrupt creation. That is why I believe we still have a responsibility to steward the earth. We do need to speak out on global issues and seek to live lives that do not exacerbate the problem. We also need to be glory carriers. The glory of God rests in each one of us by the Holy Spirit. We have the responsibility of carrying that glory in the home, in the workplace and into every sphere of influence in which God has placed us. We are the light of the World, a city set on a hill. We are the means through which God’s great redemption and plan of restoration is to be mediated to the world. We are the church!

## The purpose of the church

Jesus is passionate about his church. It is the means through which his purposes are being worked out presently in the earth. That is why it is impossible to be a Christian and not be part of the church. If you exclude yourself from the church you are putting yourself outside the purposes of God in this present age.

The problem historically is that we have so over-emphasised individual salvation that we have neglected the corporate element. Prior to the Reformation, membership of the church was intrinsic to salvation such that, it was only by observing the sacraments that one could be saved. The emphasis of the Reformers was that salvation was not through the sacraments or by any means other than that we are justified by faith. That emphasis was truly required at the time, but it has led to a focus on getting people to heaven and not on getting them into their purpose.

We are not saved to go to heaven. We are saved to fulfil the purpose of God in the Earth. If we die before Jesus returns, we will spend some time in Paradise, but even then, that is only temporary. When he returns, he will bring back with him all who have ‘fallen asleep’. So whether we are alive or dead at his return, our destiny remains the same – to rule this world on his behalf and to fill it with his glory. The only difference will be that, by then, we too will have been glorified and made like Jesus. It is in us that God’s redemptive purpose in the earth is focussed.

Thus, our destiny remains to fulfil the original mandate given to humanity when God first put us on this earth.

Ephesians 3:1-11

Pauls sums up the purpose of the church in these verses as being to make known the many coloured wisdom of God to the heavenly realms. In other words, it is now the church that reflects the glory and wisdom of God so that all powers on earth and in Heaven can see that glory being displayed on the Earth.

In this interim period, all of God’s purposes rest in his Church. The notion that you can be a Christian and not go to church is a fallacy. The idea that you can find your purpose and be disconnected from the Church is also false.

Church is not somewhere we go once a week if we don’t have a better offer. Church is who we are. It is God’s people in communion with one another and with Him. It is his people called together for purpose.

The word ‘church’ in Greek is ‘*ekklesia*’. It means ‘a gathering of people for purpose’. It was used of the equivalent of a local government. It was also used in the Septuagint to describe God’s people in the wilderness with Moses. Thus, when Jesus declared ‘upon this rock I will build my church…’ he was contrasting his *ekklesia* with that of Moses. In other words, the church is the people of God reconstituted around Jesus and the primary purposes of God in the earth now rest in his church. Does that mean God has finished with Israel? No. For the sake of the Patriarchs, God will still fulfil his promises to Israel, however, as regards the divine mandate to see God’s glory in all the earth, that now rests with the church of Jesus Christ.

Our mindset has been that church is somewhere we go once a week in order to get blessed before resuming our daily lives. If that is all the church is, it will never fulfil the mandate God has given it. We have to become far more than we have been if we are to see God’s purposes fulfilled in these days. Church is not somewhere to go but is who we are when we meet together. And out of our united, corporate activity, God can move powerfully in this world.

## The Disciples

After the day of Pentecost, the disciples got this message loud and clear. They moved from being a ragtag bunch of misfits to being the people who ‘turned the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6). What was it that changed these men?

Firstly, it was the baptism in the Holy Spirit. We know From Acts 1:8 that the Holy Spirit was given to empower these disciples in order that they might be witnesses to the death resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that it implies. In Acts 3 & 4, we see them healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate and speaking boldly before the same people who had had Jesus crucified. By the end of the book of Acts, most of the Empire and beyond had heard the gospel of the kingdom.

Secondly, not only were they empowered, but they were also passionate about this good news. Jesus had set them free from their past life and they wanted to tell everyone about it.

Thirdly, they knew the importance of discipleship. They did not just win people to Jesus, they set up churches wherever they went. These were vibrant and diverse in nature. They were not without their problems as we see demonstrated, especially in the letters of Paul to the Corinthians. However, the apostles knew that, if they were to fulfil the divine mandate to disciple all nations, they needed to create a body so that individuals could be blessed, encouraged, taught, healed and equipped to do the work of ministry. These elements remain at the heart of what church should be all about.

With that empowering and passion, the disciples went into all the world to make known the saving power of God. What became of them?

* Paul was beheaded in Rome.
* James the son of Zebedee was put to death by Herod Agrippa I shortly before the day of the Passover, in the year 44 (Acts 12: 1-2).
* Peter was crucified upside down in Rome.
* Andrew was crucified in Russia on a ‘X’ shaped cross, hence the cross of St Andrew is that shape.
* Thomas, after going to Syria, ended up in India (Kerala) where he worked for 10 years before being speared by Brahmins who were jealous of his success.
* According to tradition, Philip preached in Phrygia and died at Hierapolis, crucified upside down.
* Matthew stayed for fifteen years at Jerusalem, after which he went as a missionary to the Persians, Parthians and Medes. It is believed that he died a martyr in Ethiopia. It was there that he was staked or impaled to the earth by spears and then beheaded.
* Jude (Thaddeus) - according to tradition Jude taught in Armenia, Syria and Persia where he was martyred.
* Bartholomew / Nathaniel went on widespread missionary travels - to India with Thomas, back to Armenia, and also to Ethiopia and Southern Arabia. He died by being flayed to death with a whip
* James the son of Alpheus, is reckoned to have ministered in Syria. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that he was stoned and then clubbed to death.
* Simon the Zealot ministered in Persia and was crucified after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.
* Matthais was the apostle chosen to replace Judas. Tradition sends him to Syria with Andrew and to death by burning.
* John is the only one of the company generally thought to have died a natural death from old age.

My purpose in telling what happened to the Apostles is not just to be gratuitous, but to illustrate their passion. With the exception of John, each one of them met a violent death still proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour of the world. If we are to fulfil God’s mandate, that same passion needs to be in the church today.

The Western church is so apathetic that it has no power to change anything. We are so sanitised and desensitised to the compulsion of the gospel. We want our material comforts and our happy little lives, whilst all around us the world is going to hell. It is time for the church of Jesus Christ to wake up from its slumber and be all that was in the heart of Jesus when he declared that he would build a church against which the gates (or authorities) of hell will not prevail or be able to resist.

## What about Beverley

We have been considering this from a global perspective but what about Beverley? It is here that God has placed each one of us. None of us are here by accident, and God has called us here to carry his glory in this place. It is we who have the responsibility to make known his good news here. It is we who are called to demonstrate by our corporate lives together what it is to live as the people of God. We are the hope of this town!

Each one of us has a purpose. We are not here to sit with our ticket in our hand waiting to go to heaven, but to fulfil the divine mandate wherever God has placed us in this town. That will mean different things for different people. My purpose is to teach and train the body of Christ to know the truth so that the truth will set them free. However, it is also to make known the love of Jesus Christ to the world, which is why you find me on the racecourse or out on the streets of Beverley on a Saturday night. What is your purpose? How are you fulfilling your bit of the Great Commission?

Nobody is exempt here. Ephesians 2:10 says, ‘For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.’

In other words, God has a list of jobs for you to do. Carolyn has a list of jobs for me to do at home. It never gets any shorter because every time I complete any of them she just adds a few more on. In the same way, God has a list of jobs for you to do on this earth and in this town. He prepared the list before you were born. If you want your life to mean anything, stop trying to pursue your own hopes and dreams and get on God’s page.

## Conclusion

We have been given the divine mandate to carry the glory of God into all the earth and to be the means through which God’s message of redemption is carried to all peoples. For us, that means Beverley. This week, think about what God has called you to do. If you don’t know yet, speak to your homegroup leader or to someone you trust, or even to me. Begin seeking God to find out your purpose.

If you know your purpose and are not walking in it, think about what needs to happen in order for you to do so. If there is a need for repentance, then do it; if there are other changes to be made then make them, or at least construct a plan to get to where you need to be.

Next week we will move on to the metaphors of the church and begin to open up the various aspects of what the church local and global is called to be.