

Why Evangelise? Sermon 26th March 2023

John 3 v 9-21 and Romans 10 v12-17

This is the final session in our sermon series on 'Why do we do things we do in church?' It's been a sort of refresher course to drive away staleness and doing things out of routine, without engaging brain or reason. We've reminded ourselves of why we come together to take the sacraments, of teaching the scriptures, about serving others, of recognising and using our gifts, of aspiring to unity, about practising forgiveness, the imperative of growing disciples and of practising hospitality and welcome. It's fascinating, and is a broad list of things we might call church or even faith.

So, this morning I'm talking about the big 'E' of our faith, individually and as church. Yes, it's 'Evangelism'. Why do we Evangelise? - an aspect of faith that many of us don't find easy to put into practice.

Evangelists and evangelism don't always have a great press within our society, There's a negative image of pushy people going house-to-house and putting their foot in the door if anyone is daft enough to open it and then haranguing you, Bible in hand, about being saved, or there are the slick telly evangelists who seem as concerned about getting your money as saving souls, or the individual carrying homemade banners on the streets proclaiming 'repent or you die' and which one of us has not crossed the shopping street to avoid talking to an ardent street evangelist pouncing to confront you with the gospel whilst your mind is on buying a new shirt?

Let's face it, in our post-Christian culture there's a strong tendency to find our own way and not be told what to believe or even do. You don't talk politics or religion in the pub. There's an increasing social pressure to keep religion as a private space – something not very fashionable.

In this context, I want to look at three aspects of Evangelism.

What is it? - Where and when? - And finally – Who does it?

So let's start with what Evangelism is – now, I'm not going to get too academic about this.

We start first with the excitement we should as Christians surely feel about our faith, excitement about the good news of Jesus as we often call it 'in-house'. Now we could go on for hours trying to define this but let's be clear this is a spiritual dimension to our lives that does not exist for the non-believer.

In faith we are taken outside of ourselves into a world where we don't make up what's right and wrong on our own terms, where selfishness is countered by unconditional love and valuing our neighbour as much as ourselves, where we are not at the mercy of unfair judgement by others or indeed our own self-doubts and failures, where the power of forgiveness trumps bitterness and hate, where we know that there is eternal life in heaven once our physical bodies have petered out, we don't even have to fear death. Where we have a direct personal relationship with the creator of the Universe through the power of prayer and praise, and we are equipped by the very Spirit of that God. We could go on and on.

What is there not to be excited about? – Whilst for the non-believer this all seems like foolishness - for us we know the experience and realities of our faith. If we are not excited about it, then it's unlikely we will want to share it.

As Jesus said in our reading, 'I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still (you) people do not accept our testimony'.

It is into this wonderful, exciting faith that Alexander has been baptised this morning and in which Chris and Laura and godparents will raise him and his brother Henry. With our help and commitment too. It is a distinctive and different approach to life than the world around us. It has an extra dimension. It's one we often don't get right, but our faith has ways of dealing with our imperfections through repentance, but again that's another story.

It's not that the world around us is all evil, yes we know from the news and our own observations that there is much evil around, but the news is a negative one-sided view of life. It never ceases to amaze me how there is so much good and caring in this world – and importantly that Christians have no monopoly of either. But the world does need to be saved from an ignorance of the source of all goodness. It will be such a better place as a result.

Our reading from St John's Gospel is often quoted as summing up the Good News with its explanation of Jesus not being sent to condemn the world but rather to save it. It raises a challenge though, that we individually have to make a decision as to whether to follow him in faith – or ignore him. This is difficult territory for the non-believer. I know, because I've been there. How can you believe in God you don't think exists or possibly have never much thought about before?

This is where witness and evangelism come in for the faithful. Witness is living our lives in the distinctive way which is truthful to Christ's teachings and observable by the world around us. Are our lives visibly special, attractive, and worthy of imitation?

Witness is the bedrock of authenticity of faith that makes Evangelism credible, but it is not evangelism per se. Evangelism is being purposefully alongside someone as they go through their journey of discovering the reality of Christ Jesus for themselves. You can't argue anyone into the kingdom of heaven, but you can explain the Scriptures and describe the Christian experience, you can encourage the enquiring mind to continue enquiring. All of which must be done in the spirit of Christ's love and not by coercion or manipulation. It is helping reveal a spiritual dimension of life that so many people don't even realise exists. Saved from ignorance as much as saved from sin.

Our desire to share our faith is not only because we value it so much from our own experience, but also because Christ is very clear that the distinctive Good news of our faith is given by him for everyone, yes everyone who accepts it, our reading expresses it as neither Jew or gentile. But we are not just recipients of this good news but actually servants of that faith, we're to live it and communicate it in all its aspects as the people of God. An essential part of that service is to tell others about. As our second reading from Romans reports,

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, how then can they call on the one they have not believed in, and how can they believe in the one they have not heard, and how can they hear without someone preaching to them, and how can they preach unless they are sent?

This is a direct challenge to us. If you want a fantastic casebook example of Evangelism, then for homework look at the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official in Acts chapter 8. Philip is told to go and stand by on the road to Gaza, which he obediently does, despite not knowing why. Along the road comes an Ethiopian official already questioning issues of faith but not understanding it, but he has an enquiring mind. God tells Philip to go and stand by the vehicle and he observes the Ethiopian wrestling with the issues of faith. Philip doesn't leap in with both feet with quick explanations or personal experiences but asks the question do YOU understand this. At which point the Ethiopian invites Philip into the vehicle to explain as they go along the road. So like all good stories, it ends, or does it begin, with the Ethiopian being baptised. Key words, sent, obedience, presence, invitation, explanation, baptism.

Which really brings us to the point of no 2 Where and When.

Many years ago, when I did my training to be a Lay Evangelist, we were fortunate to be taught by a quiet and sensitive man who had thought through and understood many different models of evangelism. Two key points stick out in my memory. He was adamant that Evangelism rarely took place in the church building. He took the final great commission of the disciples by Jesus in Mathew 28 very literally, *Therefore Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.....* The key word was 'Go' not 'come' or even 'welcome' to church but 'Go'. So yes, the bus stop, the sports club, the workplace, yes even the family gathering - often the most difficult and sensitive place. Evangelism is in the real world, not the church building.

My personal experience of one-to-one evangelism, of being invited to talk personal faith was almost always in the workplace and often in the pub. Through witness and being 'out' as a Christian, most people knew my faith and would react with critical horror when I got frustrated into swearing, or over my inability to answer biblical crossword clues, but they trusted steadfastness and integrity. Then, in the safety of established relationship the interesting deep conversations began about marital problems, feeling bitter or inadequate or what's so different about being a Christian, often 'I've got a faith but why bother about church'. So if the first memory of my training was 'Go' the second was don't be so caught up with church things that you have no time to be in the wider world. Be in it but not of it.

So my third question – Who does this evangelism thing?

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus (Paul, after whom this church is named, was probably the greatest and certainly most known Evangelist of the early church), he says

(Eph 4 v11) It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service.....

Indeed our own verse from Romans says

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.' Romans 12: 4-5

Is evangelism left to the evangelist? Well, of course not. Some of our fellowship are called and better equipped for pastoring and care, but does it mean that the rest of us opt out of caring and pastoring. Do we excuse ourselves from helping teach in Sunday school because we are not a

professional teacher? Do we not move chairs and tables because we don't feel called to be caretaker? Of course not.

The Evangelist is one who feels a special calling to take faith outside of the Christian community, to perhaps be a bit of a maverick who views and explains faith through the prism of the wider world rather than in-house.

But our faith calls all of us to serve as well as receive. We are all called to witness, and will all be called to evangelise when the moment or opportunity is there. It is a central part of our faith that we do not hold it for ourselves in some form of Holy Huddle – it is for everyone. Despite any inadequacies, we go out in faith, we are sent, and don't just welcome in. If anyone is challenged about faith this morning, then I will be in the chapel after the service to talk or pray.

I'm going to let a song sum up this talk. A song that sings of God's love for a better world, but asks the pithy question who will he send to help make it happen. To which the answer for all of us is 'I am' - I will hold your people in my heart.

As we sing it, ponder on your personal role in sharing faith with the wider world or even on the reality or excitement of your own faith. What does – I will hold your people in my heart really mean. What is your calling to service?

Let's stand to sing – I the Lord of Sea and Sky