

SERMON: 2 February 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Evangelism for the local church” (Micah 6:1-8 and Luke 24:13-35)

What strikes me about the story of the road to Emmaus is that it was quite a long walk. It's 7 miles and it seems that the 2 followers of Jesus walked the whole way and the Risen Jesus walked with them. Maybe not the whole 7 miles but then it seems that it wouldn't matter how long the journey because I suspect the Resurrected Christ can walk forever and not grow tired.

As the prophet said 7 centuries earlier:

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

(Isaiah 40:28)

he who watches over you will not slumber
(Psalm 121:3)

Now they may not have walked the full 7 miles together, a walk of say 2-3 hours, but it sounds like they had time to chat. And Jesus makes the time to let them speak about the thing that was on their hearts, the thing that mattered to them, the thing they couldn't stop thinking about.

Jesus makes time for them. He asks them what it is they are discussing as they walk along. He doesn't rush in with a message that they've got to hear. He begins where they are.

And I think that's an important lesson for followers of Jesus to learn when it comes to engaging with people. Begin where they are. Discuss what matters to them. Give them the space to express what's inside of them.

So when it comes to evangelism, sharing the good news, we must learn from how Jesus interacted with people.

[SLIDE]

In the booklet 'Evangelism for THE LOCAL CHURCH' By Bishop Stephen Cottrell - What does evangelism look like? Is it a straight line process or a four stage circular one?

[2 SLIDES]

Contact describes the initial relationships – probably already existing – of those God has brought into your path. There are usually may be more than you realise!

Nurture is an intentional investment in specific events that seek to grow the initial contact. People are not going to come to faith unless these connections are enabled and the relationships are invested in.

Commitment is the specific issuing of the invitation to people to follow Jesus Christ. The invitation comes from Jesus himself – we simply need to work out the most effective way for it to be heard and responded to.

Growth is the development of the faith that has begun. In this way a person is grafted into the community of faith. They will then become part of nurturing other relationships, which will begin the journey for others.

Prayer is crucial to very stage of course.

Contact

Non church going partners, dance group, over 50's group, golf club, people who use our buildings

Too often we ask how we can get more people to come to church.

But we mustn't start with church and then wonder how to squeeze people in.

We must start with people, with their questions and needs. So instead try asking, 'How can we serve these people with whom we already have contact in such a way as to make the gospel intriguing, challenging and appealing?'

Two samples of churches doing this I heard this week:

- Pop up cuppa in adjacent school playground
- Soft play area within the church sanctuary

Nurture

A natural follow on is to ask what are the issues or interests this person has, like when Jesus asks the two disciples walking along the Emmaus Road, what are you discussing as you walk along? (Luke 24:17).

What is the gospel for these people? Any particular story from the Bible or aspect of Christian belief that might speak to them? At the moment there are lots of people we know interested for even frightened about Climate Change and I think would appreciate hearing a Christian view on this.

What sort of event might they come to? A debate on climate change for example?

Commitment

This might be the greatest stage on the journey of fishing for people. It might be an invitation to pray with someone and encourage them to make it personal. We want people to know that they belong to the God who is love.

Growth

Baptism, confirmation. Alpha. Discipleship. The community of believers as witnesses, signposts, living their lives modelled on Jesus.

The Scottish Church Census of 2016:

- 7.2% of the Scottish population attended worship on a given Sunday (down from 16.9% in 1984).
- The Church of Scotland, at 136,910 attenders, exhibited the fastest decline of 40% in 14 years.
- Amongst denominations, it had the highest average age (60 years), a relatively small proportion of people under 25 years old attending (13%), and the smallest percentage of attenders of who have been in the congregation for five or fewer years (19%).

The GA considered this last year and have asked congregations to do so with these question:

[JECG pages 369-416]

What should the response be? The JECG report proposes a major strategic investment in new forms of church including 100 new worshipping communities to be planted by 2030, where evidence shows that:

- (a) they engage lay people of the church
- (b) have a high proportion of new people, mostly the 'de-churched' and 'un-churched'
- (c) a large number of young people.
- (d) Most importantly, they are expressing the Gospel in innovative ways at the heart of their societies, and speaking back into traditional forms of church who can learn deeply from their insights.

"Would a reasonable response be not to supplant or denigrate the existing church, but to re-invigorate it (in a mixed economy of old and new); not to necessarily to 'save' the Church of Scotland as a mass-membership institution, or as a 'national church', but to express the Gospel in mission more fully and dynamically; not desiring that we might attract those in wider society back to us, but that the Gospel might come alive for them where they are, in geography, community or network, and where they will stay? Is this not what God is calling us to do, in order to be the agents of His mission in the world?"

The report has this graphic of Pioneering type Ministry [SLIDE] - interesting to note the circle outside the box is where community activism and social enterprises are seen as good examples of pioneering activism. This is not a new thing. People from this congregation have been involved, and are still involved in community ventures seeking to transform and influence in the name of Christ.

The church is rediscovering the beauty and the value of being incarnation, being out where people are, connecting into existing networks with the values of God's kingdom of grace.

Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, we're discovering the importance of meeting people where they are and being prepared to go 'home' with them and share life where they are.

One more thing from the story on the road to Emmaus. Isn't it strange how the two followers of Jesus don't recognise him when he comes alongside them?

Surely they knew his face. Yet they didn't know who he was.

Verse 16 says they were kept from recognising him. The Greek suggests they no longer had control of their eyes, or their eyes were held so as not to recognise.

Who was holding them? Who was in control of them?

It's not until verse 31 when Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them, that they recognise him. But it seems as soon as he becomes recognisable he vanishes from their sight.

It was just a glimpse in the breaking of the bread . But it was enough to convince them that the Risen Christ had been with them.

You can see why the breaking of the bread became such an important act of faith in the early church and how it remains so today. Our hope is that Christ is present in the breaking of the bread.

When the two followers of Jesus recognised him in the breaking of the bread, they started to put two and two together and they marvelled at how their hearts had burned within them as Jesus spoke with them, in the guise of the stranger, opening the Scriptures to new understanding.

The Risen Christ speaking through a stranger and bringing fresh revelation from the Scriptures.

Like those two followers, we might not always recognise Christ if Christ takes many different guises and comes to us in many different ways.

Yet afterwards we may realise that the Scriptures have come alive to us in a new way; we might have a fresh sense of understanding or direction or encouragement; and a renewed assurance that Christ is becoming all and in all.