The Church Unleashed as Herald

What is a herald then? I hear you ask. Well, it’s a messenger. Or to put it another way, an evangelist.

Q: How do you feel when you hear the word evangelism?

Nervous? Scared? Excited? Something only the real keenies can do? Something I could never do as I don’t know enough.

Q: When did you last have some good news to share? A new baby, new job, even a tv recommendation – more on this later.

How did you feel when you heard the news?

Didn’t you desperately want to go out and tell people?

Q: How do we preach the good news?

There is a famous quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi. “Preach the Gospel at all times. **When necessary**, **use words**.”

Helpful?

Throughout the last few weeks we’ve seen some marvelous examples of great kindness. And let’s be honest, it’s not something that is peculiar to lockdown. We, as St James’ congregation are great at inclusion and welcome and acts of service.

But is that enough?

Are we doing these things for God?

If so, do the recipients of these acts know that? Do we just hope they will ask? And what if they don’t?

As we heard from…. The climax to Matthews account of Jesus’ ministry – the thing which he wants us to take away from it all is this. ‘Go out and make disciples of all nations.’

He uses the word COMMAND. It’s not a suggestion, not an add on. It’s a command.

So how do we make disciples of ALL NATIONS?

Do we do it literally as the early missionaries did and actually go to places that had never heard the gospel and tell it? We could, if that is God’s calling for us. It’s not reserved for your Jeremy Irons and Robert DeNiro types. There are missionaries these days, preaching the gospel in Brazil, like Stu and Rosie. There are even missionaries in Ibiza trying to get the good news across to drunken ravers and stag and hen parties. Whilst I massively admire those that do, I think you have to have a particularly strong calling for that sort of thing and I haven’t had that.

I have had a calling to do that in this country through the local church. That is why I work for Christians Against Poverty.

But this command doesn’t have to mean massive upheaval or anything spectacular. It can start with one small chat with one person.

I’m not going to take you through how to get people to commit their lives to Jesus. That’s not what this is about. It’s about sowing seeds.

Think of the parable of the sower.

A farmer sowed some seeds, some fell on the path, some on rocky ground, some amongst thorns and some in good soil. And unsurprisingly, only the ones in good soil were fruitful. This is like the word of the lord. Only people who are like the good soil will bear fruit. What we need to remember is that all these elements can be changed.

We can prepare the ground and make sure the soil is ready. We need to take the rocks out of the rocky ground. Maybe cut away at some of those thorns that are stopping us getting to the good soil that is there. Misconceptions about the church, issues with trust. And the path. The path in those days wont have been concrete. It will have been what you call Hoggin. Like you get as you walk through the woods. Its dirt and rocks and sand and it’s been trampled down and walked over so much that its rock hard. Nothing can get in. but if we can soften that up and get through, we can change the consistency of that ground.

Let’s go to the passage in Acts. Paul has gone to Athens and sees the Athenians worshipping all sorts of Gods and Idols. He points out that they even have an idol to ‘THE UNKNOWN GOD’. What he wants to get across is this: The one true God is not unknown. He is more than known. He knows us intimately and he wants us to know him in the same way. Isn’t that good news? Isn’t that something worth shouting about?

So who was this bloke telling the Athenians how good God is? Well, his is probably THE most famous conversion story there is. Saul (as he was known previously) was, as my Dad would say, a baddun! He was horrible. He tortured and persecuted Christians in order to wipe out the Christian movement. Then, one day on the road to Damascus, he met the crucified and risen Christ and his life was INSTANTLY changed.

Or was it?

I don’t know about you, but my conversion to Christianity was a gradual thing. A recognition and then deepening of my faith. There was no burning bush or lightning bolt. I didn’t have a ‘road to Damascus’ conversion. I sometimes wish I had. It would make for a great story to tell.

But I’m going to put it to you that, neither did Saul. Ok, he had a literal ‘road to Damascus’ moment because that’s where he physically was. But, I don’t think his conversion was instant.

He will have known God. From being a baby, he will have been brought up knowing, at least, OF God, if not the real truth of God. And he will have known about Jesus. He certainly knew the effect of his teachings and of the claims of his death and resurrection, as that was his issue with Christians in the first place. He may have even heard him preach. In the temple or at one of his gatherings. So none of this was new to him.

That is why he NEEDED to meet the CRUCIFIED and RESSURECTED Christ.

And once converted. Once he realised how wrong he had been and repented. He didn’t suddenly become the person that travelled all over the world telling the good news. Going to Athens and denouncing their idols.

No, Jesus had prepared someone for him to talk to about his new-found faith. He sends him to the house of Ananias, where he has some one-to-one time with someone further on the journey of faith than him.

Then he is put into a small group of people to again, chat through what this all means.

Only then does he become this passionate Herald and evangelist that we recognise from his letters.

It is a journey. That even the most famous and revered evangelists go through.

So, I’m not asking you do do THIS. This thunderbolt moment. I’m asking you to do this bit. The bit beforehand. Look for conversations not conversions. Till the soil, remove the rocks, cut out the thorns and break up those paths. People have to hear the message if they are to know of Jesus’ redeeming power. So there has to be messengers – Heralds. And that’s us. The Church – Unleashed!

 Conversations not conversions.

Does that make things seem more comfortable? More doable?

Because it’s not about sealing a deal, or getting someone over a line or through a door. The conversation you have now may not bear fruit for another 30 years. And you may not even be aware when it does. But if you don’t have that conversation, it never will. That path will stay solid and those thorns will still be there.

We don’t have to know everything theologically. Just share your experience. Why not write a 30 second testimony?

There was a time when…

Then I met Jesus

Now I’m…

Mine is:

‘There was a time when I was crippled with depression and anxiety.

Then I met Jesus.

And now my life has hope and joy, knowing I have someone to turn to and that I am loved. No matter what I do or what mistakes I make.’

Think back to what Connie showed you earlier. That’s something a 10-year-old picked up in 5 minutes. I only showed her that once.

We have to do more than actions. But, there also has to be more than words. It has to be both.

If you use only actions, you are seen as a kind person and thought well of and, if people know you are from St. James’, it will reflect well on the Church. But people might not get the full picture of why.

If you use only words, you could be seen as the crazy preacher who stands in the town centre, yelling at people to repent.

No, you have to do both. Do good things and tell good news.

Conversations not conversions.

I said right at the start that I’d speak more of a TV programme that I’m evangelistic about.

THE CHOSEN. Not only is it a fantastic watch, but it can also be an evangelism tool. It’s the story of Christ’s ministries told from the point of view of the people whose lives he touched. It is filmed on location with a more ethnically accurate cast than you may have seen before. I cannot stress how good this show is. I have put a link in the comments below and on the website and I urge you to give it a watch. I feel I could show it to a non-Christian and say, ‘look – this is what it’s all about. This was Jesus. This is how he has affected MY life.’

I’m going to show you a clip – it’s actually the very last scene from the first series, so spoilers for a two-thousand-year-old story! It is Jesus talking to the woman at the well. He has gathered his disciples and they are on their way to Samaria. His Disciples have gone ahead to secure lodgings and Jesus stops at a well where a Samaritan woman arrives to draw water. He tells her of the barriers he will break down and that no one will be denied a place in the Kingdom.

I want you to pay attention to the woman’s joy at the end of Jesus’ conversation with her. And then to the disciples’ reaction when they realise that they can now tell the world who Jesus is. I want that enthusiasm. And my prayer is that you do too and you WANT to go out and have those conversations…