

SERMON FAITH IN CULTURE

Let me begin by asking you a question.

As you look back over your own lifespan ... how have you seen culture change?

And then ask yourself, how rapidly you've seen this rate of change accelerate in the past 20 years?

Do you realise that was in only 1998, that a fledgling new little company was just being born in America? This company was called Google.

Today, **Google and the Internet** has literally transformed virtually every single aspect of the way we live. From the way we **communicate** - to how we **consume news** – how **we shop** – how **we bank** - how **we navigate**, and how we **entertain ourselves**.

It's also transformed the way churches attempt to communicate the Gospel.

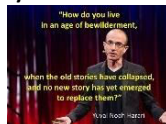
But without doubt, one of the most dramatic, and still unfolding aspects of Western Culture, is the changing attitudes of people to the big narratives, that have traditionally held us together as a culture and society. The stories that unify us.

I'm talking about the Economic narrative, Political narrative, Environmental and Religious narratives. These have been the mainstay of our way of life, but they've all been shaken and badly wounded.

The Financial collapse of 2008 and the failure of trickle-down economics to work for the common good - Political corruption and continued failed promises – Environmental neglect - The massive Child abuse scandal in Church – All of these have contributed to a collapse in trust of these central narratives of our culture.

And of course, the more they've de-stabilised, the more we've seen an increase in a general restlessness and unease in the world.

One of the foremost commentators and observers of present-day culture, is this man. Yuval Noah Harari. Back in 2014 he released a book called Sapiens (A Brief History of Humankind) that has become a global phenomenon. In his latest book, **21 Lessons for the 21st Century**, Harari has a quote that for me captures what many today are feeling and observing.



“How do you live in an age of bewilderment, when the old narratives have collapsed, and no new story has yet emerged to replace them?”

— Yuval Noah Harari.

The age of bewilderment. Herein, lies our challenge of FAITH IN CULTURE.

Because it's into this uncertain and evolving cocktail, that Christianity, now has to try and find its distinctive voice. And this is no easy challenge. Because the Christian narrative itself, is one of the casualties of this collective bewilderment and mistrust.

So big questions for us today and throughout the series.

- **How do we communicate our faith, God and the Gospel in today's culture?**
- **How do we keep our distinctive Christ-like voice, without sounding like a judgemental dinosaur and yet still scratch the spiritual itch that's undeniably out there?**
- **How do we bridge the gap?**

In today's Gospel passage we have 3 expressions that for me capture...

The spirit of the Age - The spirit of the Challenge - The spirit of the Way Forward.

- **What are you looking for?** – said Jesus to the followers.
- **“Can anything good come from Nazareth”** says Nathanael to Phillip.
- **“Come and see” – says Jesus and Phillip.**

Let's unpack the first one and the words of Jesus.

When two followers approach Jesus and ask him where he lives. As he so often does, Jesus meets a question with a question. Verse 38 **What are you looking for?**

NOW WHY does Jesus ask this?

Why didn't he just tell them where he currently lived?

Well because Jesus wants to understand what it is, they're actually seeking.

He wants **them** to think about what is, **they're** looking for.

He wants to understand their spiritual itch.

- **And this for me, this is one of the first steps for church.**

We have to take the time to understand what it is that people are looking for.

Because what we think people are searching for, may not be in sync with what they are actually searching for. And to do this we need to **understand** culture.

The stark truth, is that churches and leaders who don't even try to understand the culture, will never be able to speak into it. Look at the ministry of Jesus. He totally engaged with culture. He didn't just say to those seeking, come with me and then take them to church. (the synagogue). He went out among the people. He even took them into what Jews considered godless Samaria. He engaged and dialogued with everyone, especially those he wasn't supposed to engage and dialogue with. The woman at the well - Zacchaeus the despised tax collector. **And here's the point!**

Because Jesus engaged in His culture, he understood his culture.

And because he understood his culture - he could speak into his culture!

Jesus never compromised who he was ... but he didn't put up barriers either.

St Paul was exactly the same. In Athens, he quotes Greek philosophers and poets to build a bridge to the Gospel. **AND FOR ME THIS IS OUR POINTER.**

Because make no mistake, people today are searching. People are spiritually hungry.

The fact that so many are disenchanted with the big narratives, means people are searching for a deeper meaning and purpose. Authentic truth and real hope.

The challenge we have, is that the very people who are seeking answers to these deep questions, are echoing the spirit of Nathanael.

When Phillip invites Nathanael to come and see Jesus, he gets a pretty blunt answer. "Are you kidding me" says Nathanael ... **“How can anything good come from Nazareth.”** When we ask people to come and see Christianity, they basically say the same thing. Can anything good come from there?

But there's a 2-way spirit going on at times. Let's be honest!

I've heard many a conversation from Christians, saying the same sort of thing about culture. Can anything good come from a 'secular society'?

None of these attitudes take us anywhere particularly helpful as we try to bridge the gap.

What **we** mustn't do, is pull up the drawbridge, get defensive and become insular.



One of the big realities we now have to face, is that Christianity in the West, was once like an ice cap, covering vast areas of culture, but is now shrinking and receding in the heat of scepticism and indifference. What we mustn't do, is end up floating in a sea of isolated irrelevance, just gathering and talking among ourselves. Our calling is to be salt and light in our culture. Salt just in a bottle, cannot flavour.

So what's the way forward?

I think we listen to those words from Jesus, to those who are seeking.

“Come and see”

What Jesus basically says to people, is come with me and see what God is up to in people's hearts and lives. Come with me, and I'll show you a different way to see.

- **I think we have to be open to where God might be saying to you and me ... “Come and see where I'm at work in the world.”**
- **Where do you see the Spirit of Christ at work, and maybe in surprising people and surprising ways!**

Because the more we engage with culture – the more we can understand culture. And the more we understand culture - the more we can speak into culture!

And if you want the best example of this biblically... then look no further than what I consider to be one of the most explosive encounters in the whole of scripture.

I'm talking about the encounter between Peter the Apostle and Cornelius the Roman Centurion.

Acts 10 Why is this so explosive?

Well here are 2 people so far apart culturally, as is possible to imagine.

Cornelius is Peter's cultural enemy and oppressor and a gentile, which makes him unworthy of consideration in Jewish eyes.

AND YET, both of them, get a vision and a prompting from God to step outside of their *barriers, boundaries and prejudices*, to come together and meet up.

God is saying to both of them ... “come and see where I'm at work.”

It's actually Cornelius, who invites Peter. And we see Peter's struggle with this because he spells it out on his arrival at Cornelius's house. **Verse 28 “You are aware that it's against our law for me to even be in the same room as the likes of you. But God gave me a clear instruction. Do not call anyone unclean and impure. So I came without objection”** This is God basically saying to Peter ... “never presume to know how I'm at work in the world.”

AND WHATS THE FRUIT OF ALL THIS?

Well because they had the courage and imagination to step out... where there was once **barriers, boundaries and prejudice** – now there's **engagement and dialogue**.

Two people have come together to hear what God might be saying to them.

HOW DOES THIS CHALLENGE US TODAY?

Well maybe the first thing, is that we should never presume to know where God is at work in the world today. We can use words like 'secular', 'non-believer' a bit too easily at times. How do we know where God may be at work in people's hearts and lives as he was with Cornelius?

Maybe God is saying to you and me and all His church ... *"Come and see what I'm up to in the world and culture."* And, maybe like Peter, we can be surprised.

Here's a story of how I've experienced all of this recently.

A few weeks back I went on a Writers retreat down in Central Otago with around 50 others. At the end of the weekend I was sitting the local pub talking to a guy called Bill. Bill was in his early 80's as sharp as tack and had spent his life as a Doctor, specialising in the area of Psychology and Mental health. Over a few beers we got into a deep and meaningful conversation about 'all things' existence.

He asked me about my life, so I told him I was a Priest - that I'd been in a band and still very much involved in music. I told him about the concept of Spirituality of music and the gigs we do.

And Bill said to me *"don't take offence Josh but I don't believe in God. With all the things I've witnessed in the world, I find it hard to believe in a good God interested in the affairs of the world."*

Now this could have been the conversation killer or the point where I just switch the subject.

But I said to him, *"Bill, I'm certainly not offended, given that for many years I didn't believe in God, so I can totally understand your perspective. But let me ask you a question. What's your understanding of God?"* I asked this because quite often when people tell me the kind of God, they **don't** believe in, or they think I believe in... there's often a disconnect.

I told Bill, that I believe in a big God who can and does, move in mysterious and surprising ways. And Bill said, *"give me an example."*

So I told him the story I tell at the Spirituality of Music gigs.

Some of you may have heard this story but many will not.

Back in 1989 the Guardian newspaper asked the great British public to name their favourite song lyric. Not favourite song, but song *lyric*. I was curious what this would be. After all, to be your favourite lyric of all time it's got to be speaking powerfully into your heart. What do you think this would be? Just hold that thought.

Then a few years back, some of you will remember that a young Indian woman was brutally assaulted by a gang of young men on a bus in Delhi. The outrage went viral, and in a local park in Darjeeling, thousands turned up to protest and voice their support and solidarity for this young woman. **600 of them brought their guitars.**

Once again, music seems to be central to how we express prayer and support.

There's a 'You Tube' clip of this and what's truly remarkable, is that the song they chose to sing is exactly the same song that the British public picked as their favourite song of all time, 30 years previous. And it's this.

VIDEO CLIP – IMAGINE

I said to Bill ... *"What is it about the power of this song - written by a young man from Liverpool 50 years previous – that has transcended barriers of time, age, race, culture and creed ... so much so,*

that a bunch of people turn up in a park in Darjeeling to sing these words as their prayer of solidarity?

When I looked up at Bill, he was crying. And he said to me... *“Josh I find this story profoundly moving on so many levels.*

And I said to him,

- *“Bill, whatever it is that prompted John Lennon to write those words 50 years ago...*
- *Whatever it is about this song that has enabled it to travel down the years touch people across continents ...*
- *Whatever it is that stirred the hearts of those people to want to turn up and sing in solidarity and support of the young women ...*
- *And whatever it is, about this story that’s touched you so deeply, it’s made your cry.... **Then that for me is the Spirit of God.***

*Call it God, a higher power, a Spirit ... whatever the limitations of your own language but for me **THIS IS THE SPIRIT OF GOD** at work in the world. And I happen to believe, that it’s in the person of Jesus Christ, that we see this beautiful Spirit most powerfully expressed.*

And Bill said to me... *“I’ve never thought of it like that Josh”.*

As we left the pub a bit later and said our goodbye’s ... Bill said to me... *“Josh, if I lived up in your area, I’d come to your church because I’d like to know more.”* I don’t say this to boast, I say it because it’s encouraging for me and it might be for you.

I’ll finish with these thoughts.

I was trying to engage with Bill, to see ‘what he was looking for’.

I could see that Bill wasn’t sure that ‘anything good, could come from faith’.

So, I tried to invite Bill to ‘come and see’ a different perspective on God. A different understanding on how God might be at work in the world.

This particular approach comes from the experiences of my life, but it might look different for you. You have different stories and different giftings so you can reach different people to me. As we try to communicate our faith it’s not a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

But one thing we must all do... is to be open to God’s invitation, for US to ‘come and see’ where God is at work in the world.

What we can’t afford do is stay closed? Because if Peter and Cornelius had done this, we wouldn’t have this incredible encounter in the bible to inspire us.

So where might God be asking you to step out of your cultural and religious barriers, boundaries and prejudices, to see what God is up to in the world?

Because the more we engage with culture, the more we can understand culture.

The more we understand culture, the more we can speak into culture.

And the more we can speak into culture

the more we can communicate our FAITH, IN CULTURE.