

SERMON - TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH – The Good News

I was listening recently to Pastors Tim Keller and Rick Warren talking about their surprise at how partisan, political and ideological the church has grown in the last year. They understood that for some Christians, there's a deep anxiety about being in a culture that's rapidly moving from Christian to post-Christian. But they questioned the wisdom of trying to hang on to power by simply blaming culture or to seeing politics as their salvation.

So I want to start this whole sermon series with a quote that cuts to the heart of things. It's by Canadian pastor Carey Nieuwhof who I often tune into. He interviews leaders from across the whole spectrum, mostly Christian but also non-Christian, to have crucial conversations about the pulse of culture and challenge for Church. He recently offered these words...



“Most people are exhausted by the division, tribalization, and anger that characterizes culture today. It's pretty clear that the culture is tired of itself too, but it doesn't quite know how to escape.

A generation tired of hate, yet caught in its grip,
will only be released from it if there's a clear alternative.
It's the perfect opportunity for the church to simply be the church.
An authentic, grace-filled, hope-bearing, truthful people are what our
friends and neighbours need most.”

An exhausted culture needs an alternative to itself, not an echo of itself.

**What an exhausted culture needs most, is a Good News alternative to itself,
not just another broken an echo of itself.**

The Book of Acts is a truly inspirational voyage of Holy Scripture. Because it tells the story of the birth and the dramatic expansion of Christianity and the early Church. People who went out boldly and with real conviction, to proclaim the Good news alternative. The Good News of what God has done and his doing in the world through the power of the Risen Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Acts is also a very *provocative* piece of Scripture.

Because it tells a truly incendiary story of the Holy Spirit, **dancing in places, it was thought no dancing was allowed.** Such as the story of a Roman Centurion Cornelius and the Apostle Peter. A truly radical story of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of 2 people from completely different races and culture, to break down their dividing walls of hostility, and to bring them together. And in the process, deepen both their understandings of just HOW BIG, inclusive and restorative, God's love really is.

Can you think of a more relevant message for today's increasingly, angry, tribalized and polarised world, than this? And who wouldn't want to hear this kind of 'good news' alternative?

But therein, lies the big challenge for Church today.

We **rightly** believe that we have a beautiful Gospel message of transformation and hope in Christ to proclaim. But the painful reality, is that for too many people, our '**Good News**' doesn't sound like 'Good News'. And this is the rub! In fact, most people hear it as something completely different. There is a disconnect.

The sobering truth, is that Christianity and the Church (particularly in the West), now faces some very serious challenges. And yet, anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, knows that there are a whole lot of people out there, desperately searching for **meaning and purpose** in this uncertain fragile world, but they don't see Christianity as the answer.

And essentially, we have 2 choices of how we can respond to this challenge.

- **We can go into denial. Blame it all on the heathens. Bad old secular society. And carry on much like before.**
- **OR, we can meet the challenge, by acknowledging the reality of the challenge, and then seeking the Spirit's guidance, to RISE to the challenge.**

Now in all situations in life, I always try to be the 2nd option kind of guy.

So that's what I want to do today through our 2 scripture passages. Because what we have in both of them, is Jesus Christ speaking directly to his first followers. The first 'Life Group' in church history!

So I want ask ... What does Jesus have to say, to you, me, (His followers) and His Church to give us wisdom and encouragement to meet our challenge today?

Let's start with Acts 1 verse 8 where Jesus makes it pretty clear that our mission calling has never changed. **8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (locally) all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

And in the Gospel passage from John, Jesus says exactly the same thing in different words.

⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. My witnesses.

So here we have Christ before the Cross and now as the Risen Christ, reminding us of what our mission calling actually is. **'Empowered by the Holy Spirit, go out and be my witnesses locally - beyond - and even to the ends of the earth.'** Take the Gospel good news - be the salt and light of this good news ... and bear much fruit. In other words, **find the good purpose for your life, in the Good purposes of God.**

But this is where we need to acknowledge the reality of our challenge.

To put it bluntly, we aren't bearing as much fruit as we should.

So how might these next words from Jesus speak into this truth?

John 15: 1 **"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he (even) prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more."**

A fundamental truth from Jesus and a provocative one. So let me ask a provocative question. Do these words point us towards a painful truth we need to ask ourselves?

Is it possible, that we the people of God, are being pruned by God?

Pruned because we aren't bearing as much fruit as we should. And WHY is this?

What I want to suggest today, is that one of the core reasons, is that the good news we proclaim, isn't the FULLNESS of the good news that Christ wanted us to proclaim?

And I want to do a little experiment to tease this out.

If a non Christian were to say to you, "tell me in one sentence what your Christian 'good news' is" ... what would you tell them? It's an important question.

If we are to be witnesses to the good news,
we need to understand what the core heartbeat of this good news really is.

Take 30 secs to formulate a sentence.

Now hold that sentence in your head, as we take a deep dive into scripture and compare the sentence in your head to what Jesus Christ thinks the Good news is for Him. And Jesus will have a pretty good idea, because He's the Author and Perfector of our faith.

Let's start with the Gospel of Luke, because it's essentially the Book of Acts Vol 1.

What do we hear Jesus saying is the good news for Him?

Luke 4:43 ... 'I must proclaim the good news of ___ ____ _ ___ to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' Anyone want to fill in the blanks? Here is Jesus telling us, **the purpose** for which he was sent?

Well, the missing words are these.

'The kingdom of God'.

Here in a sentence, is the Good news for Jesus Christ.

**I must proclaim the Good news of the kingdom of God,
because I was sent for this purpose.**

How close was your sentence to this?

To make this even clearer ... **Luke 8:1 Jesus went through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news - of the kingdom of God.**

Luke 9:1 Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority, sending them out to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Matthew 4:17 ... Jesus began to preach, "Repent, (turn around, change the direction of your life) for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And just to clarify, the 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' is the same thing. But Mathew writes for a mainly Jewish audience who were a bit more sensitive about saying God's name, so Matthew uses heaven instead.

Right at the beginning of Mark's Gospel verse 14... **Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God** (so this is God's good news too) **by saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; so repent, and believe in this good news.** In other words, said Jesus... find the good purposes for your life, in the Good purposes of the life, God intended. Because it's breaking in.

Which brings us to another big question.

What is this Kingdom of God in one sentence? Well, we say it every week in Holy communion in the Lord's prayer. **"Let your kingdom come and Your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven."**

The Kingdom of God is when God's 'will' and God's 'way' reigns supreme here on earth as in the heavenly realm. When everything on earth is lived out the way God would want it to be. It's when we are the good news alternative to an exhausted culture and not a broken echo.

What does this look like? It looks like Jesus. His justice, His peace, His teachings, healings, signs and wonders. The heavenly way made flesh, by Jesus here on earth.

And just in case you think that the Cross and Resurrection changed the core heartbeat of the good News for Jesus. In the Book of Acts today verse 3, we're told this.

3 After his suffering, the risen Jesus appeared to His Apostles over a period of forty days and spoke to them about ... the kingdom of God. And what about St Paul, the main guy in the Book of

Acts. Did he get the message about what the good news is for Jesus? Well in the very last 2 verses of Acts... **For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming *the Kingdom of God* and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.** This is the biblical FULNESS of the Good news alternative.

SO WHY IS THIS ALL SO IMPORTANT?

Well 3 REASONS and these are the practical take aways.

- **Firstly**, how we *understand* what the good news is, affects how we live out our own faith ... and it also affects *how* we communicate the good news of our faith to others.

If we are going to be witnesses to this good news locally and to the ends of the earth, then it's pretty important that our good news is the same as Jesus' good news. If it's so central for Jesus – it has to be for us?

- **Secondly, for people who are seeking meaning and purpose for their lives, how much more relevant does this kind of good news sound?**

That in every arena of their lives, they can find meaning and purpose in the Good purposes of God. Who of us doesn't exist in a kingdom of one sort or another?

We have our family kingdom. School, university and workplace kingdoms.

Our Business Economic and Medical kingdoms. Political, Military and Justice kingdoms.

And the most recent kingdom of them all... the kingdom of the Internet. The Kingdom that influences and impacts every aspect of human existence.

There isn't one area of anyone's life, that isn't shaped, formed or involved in a kingdom of some shape or form. The question for all of us, is how does God's good purposes 'break in' to our everyday purposes? So that we are an alternative and not just another broken echo.

- **The third reason this is important, is because I don't believe the FULLNESS of this good news has been central to our good news message, as it should be.**

I know that when I first came to faith 20 years ago, the 'good news' of our '*salvation*', seemed to be mostly about going to heaven when we die. Which is great, I'm as invested in the afterlife and resurrection hope as anyone. That death doesn't have the final word is central to our hope..

But I also wanted to know, '*what's our resurrection hope in the here and now.*' So I loved it when I started reading the Gospels and I heard Jesus tell me... **the Kingdom is near, it's here, its within you, it's all around. So go find your life's good purpose, in the good purposes of God. And I thought yes. I want to be part of this good news alternative.**

In verse 11 of Acts we hear about the 2 men dressed in white who said to the apostles **11 "why do you stand here looking into the sky for Jesus?"**

If the Church is to rise to the challenge before us now, the good news can't be all about looking skywards for Jesus. Because Jesus has a mission on earth, and we are called to be witnesses to it through the power of the Spirit. Our salvation, isn't a cosmic insurance policy for the chosen few. It's the privilege of serving God's mission to restore and renew. It's why we at St George's constantly preach the *fullness* of this good news in Christ, summed up perfectly by Tom Wright.

"Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about." — N.T. Wright,

I said in the sermon card. That we live in an internet world that give us more opportunity to take the good news alternative to the ends of the earth, than at any other time in history. And the Church has such a crucial role to play at this time ... but we do need to grasp the core heartbeat.

An exhausted culture needs an alternative to itself, not an echo of itself.

If we the Church - live out the ways of the Kingdom and Jesus Christ, then we will **always** be an alternative good news vision for humanity. And when our good purposes are aligned to God's good **healing** purposes –then we can be sure, that they will always have eternal significance.

When the captives are set free - when the hungry are fed – when the broken are made whole – the marginalised are included -the dividing walls of hostility are dismantled – and we know in the deepest place of our hearts that death does NOT have the final word – then we are living in the ways of the eternal kingdom. Eternity is now in session.