

22 August 2021
St George's Zoom

PROCLAMATION: The First Mark of Mission (Matthew 9:35- 38)

There were only 2 days each year when I dreaded working for World Vision. These were the two days when I joined the World Vision teams working in shopping malls and street corners trying to encourage people to sponsor a child or give to our latest campaign. We were disparagingly known as 'chuggers' – ie charity muggers.

It did not help that I was an absolutely pathetic 'chugger' – somehow I just could not bring myself to bowl up to an obviously harried mother, arms loaded with parcels, clutching two children in various states of meltdown and ask her cheerily "How is your day going and have you ever thought of sponsoring a child?" Adding to my discomfort was that I knew that even if she said "Yes" on impulse, or to get rid of me, she was fairly likely to cancel her sponsorship within the first six months.

Now the odd thing is – I love World Vision, I have seen our work first-hand around the world – I believe in the product, I so admire our field staff and yet I still struggled to recruit sponsors.

Mention the word evangelism and I think most of us feel the same way:

- Evangelising someone feels coercive, formulaic and dehumanising;
- Most of us are convinced we are hopeless at it;
- We don't believe anyone is really interested in the first place;
- And even if they are, we are attempting to answer questions that no one is asking; and
- It is just not kiwi to go out on a limb and talk about stuff that matters especially something as sensitive as personal belief.

So instead we tick the 'like' box on Facebook and leave it to the professionals like Josh to save souls and proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven.

So we all need to hear these words from Matthew 9:

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the Harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field"

The Harvest is Plentiful

Do we really believe this?

Perception is that New Zealanders are not interested in Christianity – the harvest might be plentiful elsewhere, but not in NZ.

- But the seeming lack of interest in faith is a thin veneer indeed. Many NZers are like the 'sheep without a shepherd'. As Yuri Noah Harari in *Sapiens* writes:

"We live in an age of bewilderment where the old narratives have collapsed and no new story has emerged to replace them."

This age of bewilderment is reflected in:

- The two pandemics NZ is reeling from simultaneously – the COVID pandemic, and a second far more pernicious pandemic which has already claimed more lives than COVID – and that is of course the pandemic of anxiety, which is especially strong among the young
- The sense there are some 'wild animals' out there and there is no one to protect us
- The fear that there is no end to the 'dark valleys' and no one to guide us through them
- The shallowness and often transactional nature of our relationships

- Profound and very real sense that we are helpless to save ourselves

What is true, as studies like the *NZ Faith and Belief Study* have highlighted is that NZers are increasingly disillusioned by the church, but their respect for Jesus is as strong as ever. Further the studies show that NZers, especially younger NZers, are increasingly open to having a conversation about faith provided it is respectful and as Josh often says, provided there is no whiff of a hidden agenda.

My own experiences bears this out:

- a) I chair a trust in South Auckland works with the most vulnerable of families – 183 people came to faith last year alone – equivalent to a fairly full St George’s service;
- b) Talking to the head of Alpha in NZ last week – 60% increase in participants in the Wellington Region alone.

So I don’t think the problem is the lack of a harvest – it’s as plentiful as ever. Sticking with the metaphor - maybe it is more about how we are going about the ‘harvesting’.

Francis Schaeffer: *“each generation of the church in each setting has the responsibility of communicating the gospel in understandable terms, considering the language and thought forms of that setting”*

Previous generations have often approached evangelism through the lens of the mind – emphasizing the importance of having a response to the great existential questions of the day – is there a God? Why does God allow suffering? etc. Undoubtedly for some the journey to faith will be through the gate of reason. it will be a transformation of the mind – a completely new world view.

In reality, however, we are mostly worried about the mortgage, our job security, our kids, our marriages our health and our financial futures. And increasingly among the young they question whether

the planet has a future at all and if it does will they ever own their own home.

So for many their journey to faith will be through a very different gate to the one I entered through:

- The gate of healing
- The gate of community
- The gate of social justice
- The gate of compassion
- The gate of profound brokenness

Note how these gates largely mirror the 5 marks of mission – indeed the more fully we live out the five marks of mission in our lives, the more fully we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. And the more fully we understand that we are partners with God in enabling the Kingdom to burst forth right here among us today.

Each gate will ultimately involve a personal encounter with Jesus at the foot of the Cross, but it is increasingly likely that the journey through the gate to the Cross will be in the company of others. Recent studies by Dr Lyn Taylor on how adult New Zealanders came to faith highlights that almost all faith journeys are launched in response to an invitation to join a group of friends.

But the workers are few ...

Very familiar scene for New Zealanders – closing of the borders has led to a drastic reduction in seasonal workers – orchardists leaving apples to rot, grapes left on the vines. It just seems wrong. Imagine, therefore, how the Holy Spirit feels when He prompts us to talk to friends and family about faith and we blithely ignore the prompt.

Why are the workers so few – number of possible reasons:

- a) *Cultural cringe argument* – it just ain't kiwi to put ourselves out there – well we need to get over ourselves, if our faith is to mean anything;
- b) *We live in a Christian bubble* – we are all familiar with our temporary COVID bubbles. If we are honest many of us live in a lifelong Christian bubble. All our needs are met within the safety and confines of our Christian bubble. We socialise together, we recreate together and we holiday together. We'd love our neighbour for sure if only we had one.
- c) *We have lost our first love* – Is part of our hesitancy because we are not in deep relationship with Jesus ourselves. A relationship with Jesus is never static – but if we are not careful it can increasingly resemble a longstanding marriage that has run out of steam – we still love Jesus, it's just we don't spend much time together anymore

Ask the Lord of the Harvest

I have to say – we Christians are an odd lot. The biggest fallacy we face is that somehow we are responsible for bringing people to Christ. This reflects an over developed sense of hubris and a Messiah like complex to save the world and ... a completely inadequate theology of the Holy Spirit.

We don't convert anyone. Thank the Lord! That is the job of the Holy Spirit– the Lord of the Harvest. We don't need to have answers to every existential question that may be asked, we don't need a compelling well thought through 'pitch' – all that is asked of us is that we are in deep relationship with God **and** with our neighbour. We are all imperfect vessels and in a strange but deeply human way, it is often through our imperfections and the very ordinariness of our lives, that Holy Spirit is most able to speak to others provided we are fully present in their lives.

Now this should never become an excuse for not saying anything and hiding behind St Francis' often misquoted phrase "preach always and just occasionally use words". It is hubris and conceit to think that our actions alone should be witness enough. It implies we believe that only Christians have a mortgage on niceness and kindness. Our fivefold understanding of mission that we have been exploring these past weeks involves both word and action.

He was moved with Compassion

Jesus went through the towns and villages teaching, preaching and healing (NB the 3 marks of mission). When he saw the crowds he was moved with compassion because they were harassed and helpless

The key to proclaiming the gospel does not lie in our clever sales techniques or 'never say die' personalities. The key lies in recognising that proclaiming the gospel is not a verb, it is not a doing word. It is a posture and attitude of mind.

Jesus was moved with compassion literally in the Greek 'he felt it in his guts'. He saw first-hand how harassed and helpless the crowds felt. Unless we too have compassion for our neighbour, our evangelistic efforts will be worse than futile.

It starts by bursting out of our Christian bubbles, taking off our masks and forming deep, intent filled relationships with our neighbour. It starts by listening intently with our mouths firmly shut. It starts by us responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to offer a cup of water to a thirsty soul. Only then will the good news be preached and our friends will take their first tentative steps towards Jesus and back towards home.

So to conclude – among the most penetrating questions Jesus asks of us is "Who is my neighbour?" Are we in deep relationship with our

neighbour? Do we even know their name? Are we ready and waiting to walk alongside them through whichever gate they choose to enter the Kingdom?

Do we know? Do we care? Or is it easier for us to walk by on the other side of the road, obliviously to the promptings of the Holy Spirit but safe in our oh so pleasant, sanitised bubbles.

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