

I’m sure you’ve all heard the saying, ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him (or her!) drink.’ Sometimes people feel that this is what evangelism is like. There are lots of people around us who don’t know the truth about Jesus. We know they need to drink Jesus’ living water. But it is incredibly frustrating because we can’t force people to come to Jesus and commit their lives to him.

That feeling of frustration, and fear that it won’t work, can paralyse us when it comes to evangelism. If you feel like that, you aren’t the only one. The message we all need to hear is this: we are not supposed to force people to drink, but **to help them realise they’re thirsty**, by **showing** and **telling** them what life is like when you drink from the Living Water.

The most important thing for evangelism is not a *thing* but a *person*: Jesus. You see, at the heart of evangelism is discipleship. It is only as we follow Jesus more closely that evangelism comes naturally. So we will look first at *following* Jesus. Second, how will people know about *Jesus* if we don't tell them? Jesus commands us to go out as his witnesses, *proclaiming* him as Lord. Finally, unless we *show* people his life in our own lives, no-one will listen to a word we say.

I have to confess that I am not an evangelist. It is a special gift that God gives to some people, like Billy Graham, or J John, to share the good news with thousands. However, in another letter Paul tells Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist.'

Although we aren't all evangelists, although many of us (including me) find it difficult and pretty terrifying, it isn't an optional extra for 'super-Christians'. We aren't all supposed to *be* evangelists, but we are all called, and commanded, to *do the work* of an evangelist, to share Jesus with others.

# 1. Following Jesus

Our verses this morning begin with the words: ‘Be persistent in prayer, and keep alert as you pray, giving thanks to God.’

Paul tells us to keep on praying. Why? Why is prayer so important, and what does it have to do with evangelism?

What should we be ‘giving thanks’ to God for?

There are lots of clues earlier in the letter. In 1.21 Paul says:

(21) At one time you were far away from God and were his enemies because of the evil things you did and thought. (22) But now, by means of the physical death of his Son, God has made you his friends, in order to bring you, holy, pure, and faultless, into his presence.

Through Jesus, we are able to have a direct relationship with God, as his friends, in his presence. We are able to speak to him directly, to pray to him *persistently*, as Paul commands.

We must never take this relationship for granted. When God gave the Law to Moses, the people were so terrified of God

that they wouldn't talk to him, so they made Moses do it for them. *We* are able to talk with God, as Moses did; while we must still *fear* God, there is no need for us to be *afraid* of God.

'Natural' evangelism can only flow out of this relationship, out of the gratitude that we have for the gift God has given us in his Son Jesus. In fact, evangelism *must* flow naturally from this gift, because it is such an amazing gift! The creator of all things, the eternal God, *listens* when you, a puny little person, who will probably live less than a hundred years, close your eyes and pray. So Paul says: 'pray persistently.'

Natural evangelism should be a natural consequence of following Jesus. Only disciples who really know their Master can tell anyone else about him. Only disciples who really know their Master can live their lives as he lived his.

How can we become better disciples? How can we follow Jesus better, and so be better at helping others realise their thirst for his living water? How can we know Jesus more?

There are two aspects, both of which are equally important.

First, we are individuals. We each have to work hard, making an effort, carving out time to pray, to read our Bibles, to worship him ourselves. Just coming to church on a Sunday is not enough, in the same way that it wouldn't be enough if I only ever talked to Susie over dinner on a Tuesday evening. Jesus is the most important person in the universe, the King of all. He deserves more of our time than two hours a week.

Second, we are a community. Jesus knew what he was doing when he chose *twelve* disciples, not just one. He knew what he was doing when he created the church by sending the Holy Spirit. You all know that we have ups and downs. Sometimes we feel really close to God, at other times really distant. We need to encourage each other, help each other along the way. Look at verse 3 – Paul asks his friends that they pray not just for themselves, but for him as well. We must pray for our Christian brothers and sisters, here and all around the world.

## 2. Proclaiming Jesus

Use words if necessary? The word ‘evangel’ means ‘good news’, so ‘evangel-ism’ means ‘good news-ing’ people, sharing good news with them. And to do that we need to use *words*.

You know the story early in Acts: when Peter and John went to pray, they met a lame man on the way; he asked for alms and held out his palms... Jesus heals the man through Peter, and the man went walking and leaping and praising God. We have been given an even more amazing gift than that man. He only had his leg healed – we have been given everlasting life! Through Jesus, our sins are forgiven, and when Jesus returns we will reign with him forever!

This is the ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ of Christ that Paul mentions in verse 3. And it *must* be proclaimed, not simply by evangelists like Paul, or Billy Graham, or J John. It is not just they who are commanded to ‘speak’ about this secret, ‘in such a way as to make it clear.’ We must as well. In his first letter, Peter

writes to *all of us*: ‘Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you.’ **If we don’t tell people the good news and our hope, how will they find out?**

Do you think you could tell someone the good news about Jesus in a minute or so? What would you say? Obviously you can’t say everything, so what are the really important bits? Why *do* we have this hope, for everlasting life with Jesus?

I would encourage you to think about ways you could explain the good news to someone you know. There is *always* a point of contact between someone’s life and the good news.

‘I don’t know if you sometimes feel like there must be more to life than working 9 to 5, than raising kids, than paying off a mortgage. That feeling comes from the fact that God made you to be in a relationship with him. But instead of honouring him, we honour other things, we treat other things like they’re god: money, sex, power, material things. These things *all* drive us away from God.

‘The good news is that God came to us in Jesus to bring us back. He died and suffered the punishment for all the times we reject God; but he came back to life, and now he offers new life to all who believe in him: life as it was always meant to be. Do you feel like there’s something missing in your life, that this offer of new life sounds like something you need?’

It’s not perfect, but it tries to be relevant, while at the same time explaining the hope I have.

### **3. Showing Jesus**

Now, imagine you were offered some cooking lessons by Jamie Oliver, or Delia Smith, or whoever your favourite chef is. And men, don’t say your wife, that’s just cheesy. And anyway, everyone knows it’s my Mum...!

Anyway, now imagine you were offered some cooking lessons by me. I suspect you would rather have lessons from

someone who you know to be a proper chef, someone who you know can cook really well. Especially if you want to know how to cook something that isn't scrambled egg, or an omelette. I can do sausages and chips as well!

Well, it's a bit like that with sharing the good news. And Paul knows it. It's no good having an opportunity to teach someone to cook, to share the good news, if your actions don't match up to your words. People simply will not listen to you talk about the love and grace of Jesus if they can't see something of that in you. So Paul says:

(5) Be wise in the way you act towards those who are not believers, making good use of every opportunity you have.

(6) Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting, & you should know how to give the right answer to everyone.

'Wise' conduct for Christians means not giving any opportunity for just criticism. Paul talks about it a lot in his letters. It means living out the good news, not simply so that

it makes people ask you why you act as you do, but also so that when you tell them, it rings true.

Now, I'm not saying we must be perfect, but if you go around shouting about Jesus with your mouth, but gossip or cheat, or do any other ungodly behaviour, then quite frankly no-one will listen. People only buy cookery books from people they know can cook. As I said before we don't have to be 'super-Christians' who never make a mistake: only Jesus is perfect. But if we want people to listen, we must be genuine and graciously live out the truth we would have others believe.

Discipleship is *so* important for evangelism. **Without it we can't do it, and without it we may as well not bother trying.**

Finally, sharing our faith is not a monologue, us telling other people what they need, trying to force them to drink the Living Water; it is also listening to their questions, having a conversation. Because when you share your faith, I can guarantee that people will have questions or objections.

The first important thing here is to answer graciously, and not to be boring. If people genuinely have questions, they will be interested in having a conversation with you about it.

Now, there are five main groups of objections or questions that people have to the good news:

1. Is the Bible relevant and reliable?
2. Hasn't science disproved God?
3. If God does exist, why does he allow pain and suffering?
4. Doesn't religion cause wars?
5. Don't all religions lead to God anyway?

Five big questions, to be sure. But there are Christian responses to all of them, even if we can't answer all of them fully (like the question of suffering). I would recommend thinking through all of them, so that when people ask you, you can respond graciously, pleasantly, and in an interesting way! It is hard to speak about the good news, especially with family or close friends that you've known for a long time. We

know them so well, often the topics of conversation simply never come up naturally, and it would feel forced to talk about the good news. So, as Paul requests for himself, we should pray for God's help, for opportunities.

When God gives us opportunities, we should expect hardship. Paul was imprisoned for making use of such an opportunity. But despite persecutions, he persevered, and kept praying for those opportunities. In this country we won't be imprisoned, but we will face other difficulties. But we must still dare to lead people to Jesus, with gladness and thankfulness to God.

Recent statistics show that the vast majority of people become Christians through a friend. Will you – will I? – dare to be that friend? I guarantee, they will be *eternally* grateful.