

Mark 4, Acts 2, Evangelism (4), September 20th 2020
Mark 4:1-20, Acts 2:36-end
Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Father, in these coming minutes, give us the gift of your Holy Spirit, pour your heart for your world into us, teach and equip us to be witnesses of your good news. Amen.

Prayer

Prayer undergirds our evangelism.

Paul in his dynamic evangelism, regularly asks the churches he writes to, to pray for him. Strikingly, in his prayer requests, in letters of Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, he asks them to pray for him in his evangelism - for himself to have opportunities, boldness, clarity to share the good news, for the message to be received and honoured. We pray for ourselves regularly as we seek to share our faith with those around us. We ask others, like Paul to pray for us, as we seek to be witnesses.

As we heard when Paul shared his testimony before King Agrippa, in Acts 26, he says " I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." The NT points us to that prayer undergirds our evangelism – the names we have on our phone or in our diary, we weave them into our regularly praying. I became a Christian in September 1993. I learned later, that the role-playing group I was part of, had been regularly often prayed for by members of the Christian Union. Over the coming months, a number of us became Christians, through the witness of Christians who were in that group.

Response.

We desire these people close to us to come to know Jesus just as we do. In Mark 4 Jesus teaches there are four responses to the Good News about Jesus. As we share, we will over time experience all four of them. Years ago, as a curate, I was invited to be help in a university mission at one of the colleges in Cambridge. On a training day, we heard a local minister teach on this passage to prepare us. What he said I have found helpful ever since. Jesus was saying to his disciples: 'when sharing the

good news about the kingdom, some will respond but not all. Not all will respond but some will.'

Jesus was telling them: Look, as I share the kingdom message, as you later will share it. Some will respond, but not all; not all will respond but some will.

Seed finds hard soil. There are some we talk with who will be sadly untouched by anything we say or do. They may even be or become hostile to us, perhaps distance themselves in their relationship with us. There is nothing at all we can do about this. The main important point here is not to allow the response of people to discourage us – it easily can. In fact, it can be a main reason some of us have stopped seeking to share our faith – people we have shared with have remained untouched, perhaps after years of our witness. Jesus warns us it can be like this. Stay evangelism, like all evangelism, is sometimes very difficult.

There are others. Like the seed that *falls on rocky places*. They appear to be positive – and are responding – they spring up quickly. Yet it sadly after a time comes to nothing. They turn away. Perhaps they started to believe in Jesus, yet misunderstood the message, thinking faith meant only good things and not sacrifice, change, commitment. Maybe they were challenged by others, it was the views of others, that were important. Stay evangelism can be very disappointing at times when someone starts following Jesus and then falls away.

Seed among thorns. There are others. We welcome them into our church community, they attend Alpha, but sadly their hearts are never reached. They believe in Jesus in their heads. But they won't make him number 1 in their hearts, their centre. Some care too much for riches, pleasures of this life to ever focus on eternal things, the true reality. Others are full of anxiety, hearts too pre-occupied with worries of one kind or another, so they cannot bring themselves to trust in Jesus. What was there gets strangled. They remain only religious or after a time stop. Again, this is painful to us, as we love our friends, and we see this happening.

Not all will respond. But some will. *'Other seed fell on good soil'*. There are some who will become whole hearted believers in Jesus. These

people will in turn will influence more, perhaps many more, 30, 60 100 times. Jesus is teaching us through his parable not to be put off by the natural, painful, disappointment of the first three groups, but to carry on diligently searching for those whose hearts are like good soil, to continue being a witness.

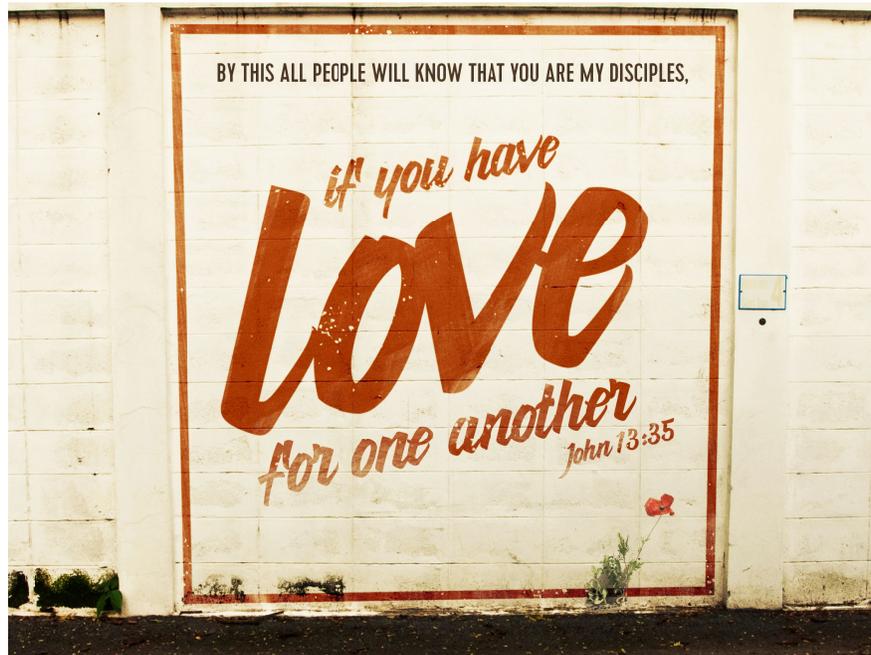
The WORD OF GOD

Jesus says the seed is the Word of God. How did Jesus communicate the Word of God? He did it by his words but more. He communicated the good news of the kingdom by everything he was. He communicated it by the way he lived, by the words he spoke, the things – miracles, touching the unclean, healings – he did. He did it as a life anointed by the Holy Spirit. At his baptism, the Spirit comes upon him, he is Spirit led – driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, he returns, filled with the power of the Spirit. He did everything, with a life shaped by prayer – dependent upon the Father (just note the number of times it is said he was praying), and he said “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself,; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does.” (John 5:19).

We seek to be like Jesus in our world. We can only do this as we are inhabited by the same Holy Spirit as Jesus was. We seek our lives, our actions, our words to have a powerful impact. We aim to love our neighbours as ourselves. We desire to live distinct beautiful lives, which includes being wholehearted in all we do. We desire to live beautiful lives living by our principles and not as hypocrites. We tell our story, the way God has worked in our lives and brought salvation, change, freedom, peace. We want to do evangelism with a foundation of prayer, seeking always the Father’s direction.

Community Life.

However stay evangelism has another principle. It is about our life together as a church community.



John 13:34-35. ³⁴ 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' Jesus shares here an important way we communicate the good news. How? A quick read and our answer may be that we communicate by our love for others. But who are the others Jesus has in mind? We communicate truth about Jesus – that we are his followers – by our love for one another, for our fellow Christians. As people see our church community, how it relates, God will speak to them, as powerfully as he does in any other way. That is what Jesus promises: 'everyone will know you are my disciples'.

In the UK, in 2015, a survey was held across a representative group of the UK pop. It found that of the practicing Christians interviewed, among the adults, 28% said that the factor which most positively influenced them coming to faith, was a standard church service; for the young people – aged 11-18, 18% said, it was a standard church service. Services

were the third highest influences among those surveyed. An important evangelism tool is the impact of our corporate church life.

If God is in the midst of us, then as people see us, as a community, they will get a glimpse of God, sometimes *more* than a glimpse. The people we pray for and others, at some point, will be brought into our community – smile – or they just get to the point, you are a Christian, can I come along on Sunday. They see what Christianity is like. When we invite them to come to our services – or to an Alpha or even to a social event – will they see a group that bears the marks of the Holy Spirit's presence?

Acts 2 shares about the first Christian community. Consider the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and his working among them and the love shown for each other.

We see Devotion. To prayer, to the sacraments 'breaking of bread; to biblical teaching, to fellowship.

We see evidence of the supernatural working of God among them – wonders and signs by the leaders, the apostles.

We see lots of praise- people filled with awe, daily praising God.

People were at ease with each other – they were together, they ate in each other's homes.

Generosity - everything in common – you had a lawnmower, you shared it with others!

Sacrifice – selling for those in need.

New Christians – the Lord added daily to their number.

Some of these we already have in our church community. Some we don't. What does our church have? What are the things it is yet to experience? Let us turn those things we see into topics for prayer – for more of them, or for them to grow and become real for the first time...We seek to belong to a community that is filled by the Spirit and

increasingly reflects the community in Acts. As people are introduced to our community, the message is expressed through the life of the community as well as through other means.

Listening

The Community in Acts was Spirit filled, Spirit shaped, and we see many occasions where the Holy Spirit spoke, and the community or the individuals listened and obeyed. This listening was not simply about the direction of a church's ministry or calling. This listening was connected to evangelism. Philip – after revival is taking place in Samaria is told by an angel to go south to the desert road. He sees a chariot travelling. The Spirit tells him: 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'. Philip has no idea what will happen. But he has heard the call, he obeys, he sees the response. He hears Isaiah being read which he asks about which leads to a conversion.

Jesus and the woman at the well. He came face to face with this woman. Which happens to us all. We journey through through life, doing our job, raise our families, belong in our churches, we serve our communities, we come to face to face with new communities. Jesus we see, used words which penetrated to the woman's heart in a remarkably short space of time. At the end her first words after leaving Jesus "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

Nothing seems to follow logically from anything else. She says – give me this water – he says, Go call your husband and come back. This proved to be the right thing to say and the conversation moved in a new direction. But how did he know. The explanation – Jesus **was listening very carefully** to the woman, he must at the same time **been listening very carefully** to the Holy Spirit. What Jesus says through this conversation must be what the Holy Spirit gave him to say.

This is an important point. The Holy Spirit can help us too, at times, to know what to say to people, to raise an idea or thought which can help take the conversation in a new way.

A true story.

Richard was involved in a mission to Newcastle. During the Mission he was invited to lunch by a lady called Gladys. The food was good. But in conversation, Gladys was very down on herself and showed that she considered herself to be a bad person. Richard listened but did not know what to say. So he decided to talk to God about it there and then. He uttered a silent prayer. 'Lord this is a very nice lady, who is consumed by her guilt. Please show me how to help her.' As he prayed, an idea came to mind.

Mrs Robson, would you mind if I asked you a question?

'Fire away' she said

'Would you say, that you are a child of God or a servant of God? This was the idea that Richard had had, one he had never used before.

'I am a servant of God' she said. 'but what is the difference between a servant of God and a child of God?'

Richard asked her if she had ever been a servant?

'Yes I have' I have worked for many people.'

'What happened when you did a bad job?'

'I got the sack.'

Gladys revealed that she had indeed got the sack on a couple of occasions and clearly felt she had deserved it.

Then Richard asked her: 'Do you have any children?' Gladys had 5 children.

'What happened when your children behaved badly?'

'I loved them even more' said Gladys.

It turned out that one of her children was a black sheep but that he still had a big place in her heart.

'So is it better to be a servant or a child' asked Richard.

'A child' said Gladys. Richard took Gladys to John 1:12 – to those who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become a child of God.' He showed her how to become a child of God. They prayed together. Gladys became a child of God and her life completely changed.

So how can we grow in learning to hear God's voice. One practical tool to try, which we have used here at All Saints. People are in a small group of 3 or 4. A person shares how life is going for them, sharing any joys or struggles. People can ask questions to understand, but not to give advice. The aim is to listen. We then ask everyone to pray – but not to pray out loud. But instead to listen to God. We want to listen to God as Jesus must have done as he talked to the woman. We ask the Holy Spirit to show us things that were not revealed in the conversation. And ask him to show us what to say next.

This listening is for around 5 minutes. Then the others in the group are asked to share any insights they have had with the person who spoke. We may be unsure if we are really hearing from God, but don't remain silent, rather say something like 'I am not sure, but I think God may be saying'... As we share, and the person is invited to respond, we may be encouraged that what came to mind, was actually the Spirit prompting. Like Richard stepped out when he talked to Gladys. If no one has anything at all, no need to be concerned. It is totally fine. Such a tool can be used regularly with eg a small group, and will grow our confidence in learning to hear his voice.

So in our evangelism, we seek to be open to his voice, and proactively ask during a conversation, 'Lord is there some something you want to show, words, questions you want me to say. We seek his direction in our witness.

Conclusions

Prayer. It undergirds our evangelism – pray for ourselves, pray for those who do not believe.

Response: Not all will respond but some will, some will respond but not all.

The Word of God – Jesus communicated by his words, actions, life, as someone filled with the Spirit, with a life of prayer seeking the Father’s direction. He sets the model for us.

Community Life – A Spirit shaped community reveals God’s presence; love for fellow Christians points them to Christ.

Listening: listening carefully to the person, listening carefully to the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I commit myself today to love and serve you by giving time to developing my relationship with you, and by the way I live among other people. Please Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit, so that I may display your presence by the way I live. May your love flow from me to every person I meet. May my heart shine because it is filled with your joy and your peace. May I be gentle, patient, kind and good. May I learn faithfulness, reliability and self control, so that my choices are Christ like, in Jesus name. Amen.