

Living His Story: 7 weeks – through Lent

If you have attended some of the online studies I've run over the past year this one is different.

Firstly to explain what a Lent course is and isn't. You may be forgiven for thinking that a Lent course tracks the story of Jesus up to his death and resurrection. It may do. But more often Lent Courses are designed to help us reflect on an aspect of our Christian living – and this is one of those courses – apologies if you thought it was a Bible Study on the Passion!

Also, it is less based on me teaching for our heads and more about how we live our lives following Jesus

Both are important, but the most important is how we follow Jesus.

NA and I have both been reading C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. One of the points he makes is that it is easy to end up being enthralled with the understanding of Christian faith but miss out on actually following Jesus. In the book he says this:

'There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself... as if the good Lord had nothing to do but exist! There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity they never gave a thought to Christ...Did ye never know a lover of books that with all his first editions and signed copies had lost the power to read them? Or an organiser of charities that had lost all love for the poor? It is the subtlest of snares.'

The Great Divorce, p74.

So as I said, there are seven weeks to the course and here are all their titles:

Session 1: The Greatest Story of All Time

Session 2: Catching Up with God

Session 3: Jesus was in the transformation business

Session 4: Communicating Like Jesus did

Session 5: Passing on the story of Jesus

Session 6: Finding echoes of the story of Jesus in our world today

Session 7: Stories of finding Jesus

Over these seven weeks we will be listening, thinking, praying, talking.

There will be input from me, discussion questions in break out rooms and times to pray and reflect.

There is some online material I can access to help with this, including some videos.

However, I watched the video for today and found it rather dull, so we'll pass on it this week! But of course we do have the book – which is in seven chapters, one for each week. Don't worry if you haven't got a copy or read it, I'll hopefully be drawing out the best bits for us to use each week.

Attending a few seminars about leading through the pandemic by various Christian organisations – sadly not the Baptist Union he seem to have cut church leaders adrift and offered little or no support – but that's another story.

In one of these seminars people shared their mixed experiences of going online – running services via FB, YouTube or Zoom. The question was raised, 'When competing

with large churches with big resources, what we offer to our church seems very poor by comparison.'

The response to the question was, I thought, very poignant and helpful. The response was, 'But they cannot out-local your church.'

I think this relates well to evangelism – in that nobody else can tell your story, except you; and of course you have a story of faith to tell; probably many stories. But let's pause here at the outset and just spend 5 minutes in breakout rooms listing all the reasons we might struggle with the idea of evangelism.

Why is evangelism painful?

Alpha Course: week one begins with the subject

Christianity: Boring, Irrelevant, Untrue

If that is the perception, Nicky Gumble then goes on to explain why this is not the case. In her book Hannah Steele uses a similar format here, first lining up some of the key reasons why we don't like evangelism.

Evangelism

1. For the experts

Chris the evangelist, J. John the evangelists

They have the best stories and the most dramatic events

They are in a café – and I just prayed and asked God for a word of knowledge

J. John by the sounds of it converts most taxi drivers he ever travels with and then tells us, just tell them about Jesus.

Then evangelism looks like **this**



Of course the other model we have for being an evangelist is the street preacher. Piccadilly Gardens or wherever – telling people about Jesus with no relationship, no engagement with the person, where they are up to and what is going on in their life.

2. Morally dubious

My mum says that when she was growing up in church she thought that people weren't singing the song, 'I will make you fishers of men', but 'I will make you vicious old men.'

The same mishearing of words might apply to the word evangelism, which some think should rather be called evandalism.

Evandalism because it has no concern for the person, evandalism because it is all about the person delivering and nothing about the person hearing. Evandalism because it actually does violence to the person.

And some Christians can think that if we do evangelism this is somehow morally dubious.

In fact in a survey of Christian millennials more than half of them said that although they felt they should evangelise, they felt morally dubious about doing so; for fear of coming across as bigoted or morally judgemental.

3. Irrelevant

People are not interested and when they do want to speak about faith more often than not they want to critique God because of all the sin, pain and suffering in the world. The pandemic in some ways has accelerated this.

It was heralded at first as being the reason thousands would be flocking back to church but in recent weeks I've heard that a third of country parishes had become financially unsustainable and it is estimated that the churches that were likely to close in the next 5 years, will actually close in the next 12 months.

4. Hard work

We try and try and live lives that point people to Jesus and yet we seem to have so little in terms of results.

And we become discouraged and demoralised.

And the great stories of conversion – Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost to 3,000 seem – utterly unrelatable to our situation.

- For the experts
- Morally dubious
- Irrelevant
- Hard work

In what ways might we deal with that in a way that is helpful to us?

What helps evangelism?

For all of us

The word **evangelist** appears in the Bible just three times.

My PA told me she was amused by the fact that I included a reading on Sunday that had the word testicle in it. The word testicle appears in the Bible three times.

The word **witness** appears in the Bible 127 times.

Witness is a word for all of us – we'll unpack that over coming weeks.

Witness as you probably know, is the word **martyr** in the original Greek. And what the word martyr meant was someone who told the story of what (God) had done for them. And that thing about being an evangelist – let me just tell you a story from earlier today.

I spent an hour today with someone who I have never met before.

He is lost as a goose, desperately needs Jesus and I was meeting him as a representative of ABC and at the end of the hour he still had no knowledge of what I do and I had told him nothing about Jesus.

You see, I volunteer at the response Hub. Brian is my Buddy Walking pal and I spent today getting to know him, listening to him and to God. Asking God what to say and when to say it and praying for Brian over the next seven days. I can absolutely see Brian saved, baptised and part of the furniture at ABC but he can't yet and at some point he'll

have to moderate his language and stop believing that the church and the police are in cahoots and it's all a money game.

In Acts the word **witness** is used 23 times – more than any other book.

But here's the thing – the word Christian is used just twice in Acts (in fact it only appears 10 times in the whole of the NT). Luke uses the word witness as his go-to word to describe followers of Jesus.

In other words, perhaps we should stop calling ourselves Christians and start calling ourselves witnesses (despite the obvious confusion there might be with a sub-Christian cult of a similar name!)

1. Always invitational

It is said that three-quarters of people who start attending church do so because someone invited them.

Christmas – Advent Trail – thousands of people engaged that. We know that for a fact because at least 3,000 people engaged with our social media. Hundreds of people every day see the 'You Are Loved' outside Hale Road and they clock it – they take it in and think about it.

All you do next is invite them in for a service.

On the chat I want you to guess the absolute favourite thing I do as a minister.

The answer is in fact – funerals. Why?

- Immense privilege
- Great significance
- Creative about what we say
- And I get to tell more people than in any other setting who are not Christians, what Jesus has done for them
- And I like the teas afterwards – Marion Perrin and co!

Invited in, not force fed.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Psalm 34:8

2. Responsive

Mark Russell CEO of The Children's Society pg 19.

- a. The Gospel tells us that we are loved.

(Explain the reason why we put 'you are loved' up at Hale Road).

- b. A few weeks ago I shared the fact that I no longer believed that the goal of the Gospel is forgiveness.

Not in a queue and line up before God and as we stand before us he says, 'Okay, forgiven – now off you go.'

We are forgiven for restoration, reconciliation.

God forgives us and then.... it's the hug – peace, kindness, if we don't get this now we are going to be on a very steep learning curve in heaven!

3. Partnership

Evangelism becomes hard work when do it on our own. It's much, much easier when we do it with others.

There is the most significant other who we need to always do evangelism with – the Holy Spirit. Remember when I told you about Brian and our hour together today. And I said I would pray for Brian – that is going to be what changes his heart. My prayers working with the Holy Spirit – a partnership.

Beautiful feet**Isaiah 52:7**

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

Nahum 1:15

Look! On the mountains the feet of one
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!