

Living His Story 6

Welcome

This week is a fun week – its specifically books and films.

The chapter title is: **'Building a bridge to the good news through books and films'**.

Prayer

Do you remember the name 'Willow Creek'? It was associated with the Seeker Service and ABC adopted that approach almost 20+ years ago through its 'First Sunday' services when, on Sunday evenings, the church service was transformed with drama (Chris Grieve, Tim banks, Val Goto, Martin Smedley et al) videos of films and TV and a relevant message from Roger.

Willow Creek is a church in South Barrington, a suburb of Chicago who under its then leader Bill Hybels, revolutionised the way that the church shared faith through its services.

One of the radical shifts they initiated, and something we now take utterly for granted, was the use of contemporary secular films, TV and cultural references in their services. They made ready connection with people as this was the stuff that instantly connected with their lives – the aim was to then build a bridge from this contemporary world, to faith in Jesus using the life situations and questions these contemporary references made.

Even on the little council estate church I worked at in Bradford, we ran 'Seeker Services' on Saturday nights, once a month – transferring North American middle-class culture, to Northern England working class culture – with a modicum of success.

Fast forward to the present day and many Christian colleges offer some study on **films and faith**.

Also, some years ago, I was invited to Heywood Baptist Church in North Manchester to talk about faith and literature.

What this wasn't was:

- Watching Christian films, or reading Christian books.
- Spotting references to God or faith in secular films or books.

What this was, was

- Using the situations and questions raised in films and literature to then talk about the Christian view or answer to that question.

Q1: What secular books or films have in some way spoken to you about Christian faith?

So rather than seeing evangelism as being one message, delivered in one way, we found that we could use lots of questions and situations to share a Christian perspective – a new and different way of looking at the world.

In the course book Hannah references a guy called **Steve Hollinghurst**. Steve works for the Diocese of Lichfield especially in helping the church to share faith. Funny thing is, Steve and

I were in the same primary school and high school classes together, and just recently I have made connection with him on FB.

Steve's picture is that the Gospel is not just one seed, but a whole packet of seeds which can produce a wonderful array of flowers. But the crucial thing to know and act on, is what seed to plant at what time. So not blithely planting the same seed over and over at every time and in every soil, but having wisdom and winsomeness to plant the right seed in the right soil at the right time.

(Ash's current seed-planting experience)

My street – talk about Dan, Matt and Dave – another one is Pete. Over the New Year some of us went on a bike ride – Pete is pretty serious about it. We chatted about what we did and I spoke a fair bit about what I do, the pandemic and how it has impacted church life. On Saturday I went to walk the dog and saw Peter return from an early morning ride. I asked him about the ride, his bike, then work and then something happened that I find rarely happens, he asked me about church. It was a chance to plant another small seed appropriate to the moment.

Today I went for my walk with Brian. Brian was on pretty good form, he's had some good news recently and he talked and talked and I listened and listened – mostly about militaria and I now have 3 DVDs to watch. I was thinking and praying about what to say, but it is incredibly hard to get a word in. At the end, while he was in his flat getting the DVDs, I wondered about whether I should pray for him, there and then, when I left. But he came down and handed me the DVD's and that was it.

In terms of evangelism today's score would be

Verbal Witness 0/10

Verbal encouragement for him 2/10

Non-verbal expression of care for him 11/10

Acts 17:

Another key biblical example of how faith is shared is the story of Paul in Athens. Paul goes to the Areopagus – the place where the philosophers debate the great questions of the day. And, as you may very well already know, Paul listens, watches and observes what he sees around him as the starting point for what he says about faith.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

This approach may be a surprise to some of us. Why bother with referencing all this cultural stuff when we really should be telling people about Jesus? Perhaps Paul has gone soft?

Perhaps he's not really bothered about people's ultimate salvation? He just wants to make general observations about other god's and not talk about the one true God.

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. NRSV

16 So Paul found himself alone for some time in Athens. He would walk through the city, feeling deeply frustrated about the abundance of idols there. The Voice

Paul seems able to overcome his indignation at these idols, his righteous anger in order that he is able to as effectively as possible share faith, communicate something of God's love and forgiveness.

Q2: Get your Bibles out and turn to Acts 17 – vs 22 onwards. What can you spot about how Paul evangelises in this situation? (Post what you see in the chat).

One: Look and Listen

We know that sharing faith is about talking – **saying** something.

And I think the church has also learnt that sharing faith is about **showing** something – the witness of our lives.

But how much have we named and acknowledged the fact that evangelism is about **watching** and **listening**.

A survey published in The Independent in 2018 discovered that the average Brit watches 27 hours of TV a week – something that has only increased during the pandemic. Watching TV and films, reading for all of us is a form of escapism, but we also get to see and read what others are seeing and reading about life and our place in the world. And BTW when I say book/film, I mean mostly recent films and v. definitely current best seller list books. It strikes me that while films can live long in the memory – and so we can reference films from years past – books are more likely to come and go. People are no longer reading books about **9/11, Alex Ferguson, Fifty Shades of Grey, or even Donald Trump!**

When we watch and read, here are some questions to consider:

- **What does this book/film say about what human beings are like? Are they good, flawed, or both?**
- **What ideas does the book/film have about life's most important questions?**
- **What does the book/film say about God or any ultimate meaning to life?**
- **How does the book/film suggest we might find meaning in life?**

This is what a good preacher uses for sermons. Spurgeon – the preacher – said that every preacher should have a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

It's what the Christian uses to make ready connection in sharing faith.

Back to my cycling neighbour Pete. During that conversation on the ride a few months ago, I remember talking about faith and the pandemic. The pandemic was, if you like, the book or

film reference – the contemporary issue which everyone is talking about and has a view on. What I said though – and this was quite unrehearsed – was that the pandemic had caused us all to reevaluate, reconsider what really is important, what really brings meaning and then I did nothing more than suggest that Christian faith has something to offer at this point. I felt that unless Pete specifically asked me what Christianity could offer, the time to pause was then. **One: Look and Listen**

Two: Give credit where credit's due

So we read that Paul was distressed, angry even, about the idols he saw in Athens, but he also acknowledged what was good.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

This is completely sincere.

And what Paul goes on to do is to pick up on what is already being thought about – here their intuitive sense that there is a creator and uses that as the place to start his message.

What kinds of things might we affirm in others:

- You're a great dad to your kids
- You are so kind to the neighbours
- Thank you for your help with that It was really kind of you.
- That was v generous of you giving some tuition to my daughter

What we are doing is building connection yes, but also showing that you are not wanting to stand opposed to them – against them – but alongside them, next to them. My friend David said that as a minister the best evangelism he did was when he had a project and invited schools, neighbours, people in the community to get involved with the church – they did it together.

Hmm – we have this thing called the Response Hub – with lots of vols from the community!

Three: Look from a different angle

Stage three is looking from a different angle. So having looked at the same thing the Athenians have – all these idols and even one to an unknown God, Paul then makes the shift to look at it in a new, unique way.

I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands,...

29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has

overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” **33** At that point Paul left them. **34** But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Sean Locke comedian – comedians are the people who others go to in order to get a different take on life, whereas in the past people went to Trade Union leaders and preachers to get a different take on life.

‘People do not change, or change much by explaining a new philosophy or by calling them to higher or a different set of moral standards. People change when they are presented with a new vision a new story about how the world works and by inviting people to enter into this new story.’

Breuggemann.

Q3: What Christian vision or story about the world might connect with people today? (Think about someone you know, think about your faith and then think about what might be most meaningful for them.)

Four: Pointing to Christ

30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

‘A man’, Jesus is not mentioned specifically in what Paul says but he does talk about repentance and faith.

This is probably is the most difficult awkward and necessary part of the whole God conversation; the talking about Jesus bit. Perhaps it was easier for Paul – he was in the place where any and every philosophical take on life could be talked about whereas people, as far as I am aware, are not chatting about Jesus at the school gate, or in the park with other dog-walkers. (I wonder what answers I might get if I asked us when was the last time we talked about Jesus to a non-Christian?)

Hannah tells the story: p 122 of getting a taxi and the driver asking her where she was going. She told him that she was off to a conference to talk about evangelism and sharing faith in Jesus. The taxi driver – a bit of a talker, then told her what he thought of faith

ending with, 'I don't mean to offend you but what you believe is a complete load of... (different word for rubbish).' He was still talking as they pulled up outside the conference centre. Time was gone, he had made his views plain there seemed to be nothing else to say. But Hannah writes that at that point she said what she usually does in that situation. As she paid him and went to get out of the cab she said, 'There are lots of reasons why I am a Christian but the most important of these is that I am simply irresistibly drawn to the person of Jesus. I am drawn by who he was, the things he said and did and the fact that he rose from the dead. That's why I am a follower of Jesus.'

She writes: 'The taxi driver replied, 'What time do you need a ride back to the station? I'll come and pick you up and we can talk more.'

'Dear England'

Stephen Cottrell – asked a question by a young woman in Café Nero.

Q4: If someone asked you tomorrow about why you were a Christian what would you tell them?

And finally.... Docents..

Before I came to ABC as minister I actually came over here a number of times – to two conferences, to officiate at a wedding and (twice) to preach. I can only remember one thing I mentioned in one of those sermons – you won't remember any.

I talked about docents. A docent – a word which comes from Latin docere meaning instruct, teach, point out.

Docents are employed in places like zoos and museums. Their job is to mingle with the crowds, look at what they are looking at, overhear conversations and step in to interpret and explain the things they are questioning.

Prayer