

## The *where* of evangelism

You may have heard of the comedian Jerry Seinfeld,  
over 20 years ago he had a show named after him: *Seinfeld*.  
His latest project is called *Comedians in Cars getting Coffee*  
And in this show he hops in a nice car, picks up a comedian friend of his  
and they go and get coffee.  
Basically it's an interview show; Seinfeld interviewing his friends.

They often talk about the work of being a stand-up comedian,  
and in the episode where Seinfeld is having coffee with John Oliver,  
they make a very interesting observation:  
Comedians cannot help making jokes. Everything is fair game for them.  
It gets them into trouble,  
because sometimes it's not the right place to make a joke,  
nor is it the right time.

Here's a question for you: I which ways is comedy like evangelism?  
I can think of a few...

We'd all like to be funny, but some people are funnier than others!  
It's the same with evangelism, isn't it?  
Some have the gift in incredible ways.  
Sometimes we tell jokes and they fall flat,  
just like when we explain the gospel sometimes.  
We love hearing a good joke,  
and Christians love hearing a great gospel message, don't they?  
*That was great!* We'll say after hearing a skilled evangelist.

But, *is it also true* that, like some jokes,  
there are occasions when it's neither the time nor the place to evangelize?  
It's easy for us to assume so because we all know that sometimes  
the gospel message is as welcome as a badly timed joke,  
but I want us to look at the Bible's understanding  
of what comprises the proper time and the place for Evangelism.

SO this week it's the *when* and *where* of evangelism.  
Are there any no-go zones when it comes to the message about Jesus?  
Is there an argument to just button up on occasions?

First of all, the *where*.  
Looking at the New Testament,  
I think that evangelism happens wherever the Gospel can be found,  
or wherever the Gospel can be carried.

Remember, our definition of evangelism is the telling of the gospel,

the good news about Jesus:  
who he is, what he has done for us, what he will do in the future.  
And so evangelism happens wherever this message can get a hearing.

One of the places where the gospel is heard *is in churches*.  
There's no doubt that the Apostle Paul was a great evangelist.  
After he became a Christian he travelled around from town to town,  
Speaking as much as he could about Jesus.  
And when a group of townsfolk believed this message, they became a church.  
And then when Paul moved on,  
the church was the place where the gospel could be heard.

The church in Thessalonica was one such example.  
Paul visited Thessalonica on a journey through Greece,  
he stayed three weeks and preached the gospel, and people believed.  
But then he moved on leaving the church behind.

Paul didn't forget about them though,  
he wrote back to the Thessalonians,  
praising them for how well they were doing.  
You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia,  
he writes in 1 Thessalonians 1:7 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in  
Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.  
“The Lord's message rang out from you.”  
Paul has moved on,  
but the message was taken up by others,  
namely the church that he left behind.  
Churches are places where people *believe* the gospel,  
and where people *speak* the gospel.  
This means churches are places of evangelism.

Last week when we were speaking about the *how* of evangelism,  
we mentioned that inviting others to hear the message is a key strategy.  
And if church is a place where the message is found,  
then inviting people to church is a key thing we can do.

Every five years we do something called the National Church Life Survey  
It's like a census return for church-goers.  
One of the questions that is asked  
is whether you've invited someone to church in the last year.  
Not 'have you actually brought someone',  
but simply 'have you issued an invitation?'.  
The average for all Anglican churches here in Sydney  
is 40% of attendees have said “Yes, 'I've issued an invitation in the last year”.

The next survey is at the end of 2021.

I reckon by then our own church could double the city wide average.  
 In two year's time, 80% of us could say  
 "Yes I've issued one invitation to church in the last year".  
 I don't think the survey cares who it is you invite, or how you invite them,  
 just as long as you invite someone somehow!  
 You could be delivering our Christmas postcards,  
 and you meet someone at their letterbox.  
 Hand it to them directly and say "We'd love you to join us!"  
 That's an invitation!  
 Maybe you volunteer at our English classes.  
 Over morning tea, hand a student a card and say "Come along to church!"  
 At HAWK, invite a parent to church. It all counts!

I reckon we could get to 80% easily!  
 Think of the easiest way for you to invite someone and go for it!  
 And of course, we're not doing this to win a competition,  
 We're doing it because our church is a place where the gospel is heard,  
 and people need to hear it.

It also follows that we need to think through all the elements  
 that go into a church service and ask  
 'how can these elements present the gospel?'  
 Our prayers, our songs, our preaching, our small talk afterwards,  
 They're all part of the church experience,  
 and we want this experience to be evangelistic!

But church isn't the only place where the gospel is found.  
 For those familiar with the Prayer Book,  
 what do we say at the end of a Prayer Book service?  
 "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord".  
 There's an expectation to gather, but after we gather  
 there's an expectation to go out into the world and serve God individually.  
 Matthew 28 Go into all the world and make disciples  
 Romans 10 How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news  
 At the very least, we leave church watching for our own opportunities,  
 and ready with an answer when people ask us about our faith.

So to answer the question as to *where* evangelism happens,  
 it happens where the gospel is.  
 And the gospel is not only in church  
 but it's also in the hearts and on the lips of every believer.  
 and those lips are mobile, aren't they?  
 Carried from one place to another by feet, or by car, plane, radio waves,  
 by all sorts of means.

And theoretically,

there is no place on earth where that gospel doesn't belong.  
Psalm 24:1 tells us, *the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.*  
There is no people group that is not the Lord's,  
no nation, no household or residence, no place of work.

We've got to resist the thinking that says "the gospel is for churches only",  
or "ministry is for countries that are already Christian", whatever that means.  
How do you think churches become established in the first place?  
How do you think countries develop their Christian culture?  
It's because people did evangelism in places that weren't Christian!

Because the gospel is mobile and because the whole earth is God's,  
then the gospel about God Son should go everywhere.

But *timing* can be another issue. We'll speak about that in a minute.

## The *when* of evangelism

One of the surprising things when we read the four NT Gospels

is how silent Jesus can be at times.

At one point early in Mark, he says to his disciples “I have come to preach”, but then as the Gospel unfolds we find Jesus telling people to be quiet, to not tell others about what they’ve witnessed of his ministry.

And then in John’s gospel we have the repeated phrase

“My time has not yet fully come”.

We read of Jesus being silent at points during his trial.

Yes, Jesus himself was a man on a mission,

Yes, Jesus himself was an evangelist,

Yes, he lead others in evangelism,

but yet he also chose to remain silent at times.

And it does seem to me to be a silence based on choosing the *right time*.

He’s not silent *all* the time, but he does pick his moment.

So we are now thinking about the when of evangelism,

We’ve discovered that there is no wrong place,

but is there a right and wrong *time*?

The Bible does speak of some instances when we might hold off a bit.

One of the trickiest fields for evangelism is the family

It’s hard to have difficult conversations with the people you love isn’t it?

Yet, our families remain the biggest single influence in our lives.

But think for a moment how that influence works within a family.

Most of it is caught, not taught, isn’t it?

We learn by observation, by living with one another.

Peter’s advice to wives with unbelieving husbands

is to win them over without speaking.

1 Peter 3:1-2 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

It’s extraordinary that Peter can speak about winning over without words.

Of course, at some point the gospel will need to be spoken by someone,

but perhaps not before the husband is moved to ask a question

or has his defenses lowered

by the integrity of his Christian wife.

The same approach goes for parents with unbelieving children,

for children with unbelieving parents, for siblings with one another.

The quality of your life is probably going to be the best long-term strategy, while you wait for the speaking opportunities to emerge.

Another area where we might put the breaks on is in cross-cultural mission.

This might sound counter-intuitive,  
but mission work will suffer if there's not proper preparation.  
You remember the story last year of John Allen Chau,  
the North American Missionary who was killed  
trying to convert the Sentinelese,  
an unreached people group from North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean.  
He went alone, with what seemed like an unrealistic approach;  
running up on the beach, crying out in English "Jesus loves you".  
He should have waited and worked with others to come up with a better plan.

And sometimes the best thing to do is to stop speaking and move on.

When Jesus is giving his disciples their evangelism instructions  
in Matthew 10, he says to them in v 14  
If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town.  
It seems that part of the Bible's wisdom  
is to encourage us to pursue the greener pastures;  
to work where the Holy Spirit is doing something  
and to not waste too much time on hard hearts.

This leads us to our next question, which asks

"well, if those are the times to be silent,  
when are the times we should speak up?"

One of Paul's favourite images for evangelism is the idea of God opening a door.

And pray for us, he asks the Colossians, that God may open a door for our message  
I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, he informed the Corinthians because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.  
(Interestingly for Paul, opposition did not mean the door was closed,  
in fact in Ephesus opposition gave him a reason to stay and speak.)  
In 2 Corinthians: I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me.  
And then in Acts 14, after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Part of Paul's strategy was to look for the opening made by God.

Sometimes he would press on a door and it wouldn't budge.  
He wanted to go to the Roman province of Bithynia and Pontus  
but the Spirit of Jesus stopped him.  
That's because God wanted him to preach in Greece,  
and so *that's* where he went.  
Just because God's the one who opens doors doesn't mean we're inactive,

we push and prod until we find the right one.

So this is when we speak up; when we suspect that God is opening a door.

Maybe it's an obvious question asked by a friend,

maybe the topic comes up at the dinner table

and there's a chance to make a contribution.

Maybe it's not obvious but you think the gospel might be needed;

at a time of celebration, at a time of grief.

Whenever I'm called to the bed of a dying person

I don't worry about saying something solely to make them feel comfortable,

that's the time speak plainly, especially if they haven't grasped the gospel.

Gently, but plainly, and the gospel—if believed—is comforting,

so I'm aiming to do both, to comfort now and prepare them for what's next.

So if we are watching for these opportunities as Paul says we should be,

then we'll see them; in his own time God will bring them.

Waiting doesn't mean never.

Paul never went to Bithynia and Pontus,

but we do know someone did after him.

We have letters from Pliny the Younger

who was governor of that province during the reign of Emperor Trajan.

And Pliny asks the Emperor what to do with these Christians in his province.

So the door did open up at some point, but it was in God's time, not Paul's.

Now, I'm going to close by making you a bit uncomfortable.

Imagine you're going skydiving.

You've done your preparation, You're in the plane, today is the day!

The timing of your jump is pretty important.

If you jump just after take off, your parachute will not deploy in time.

So you're in the plane, and you're waiting for the green light to come on.

And when it comes on you've got to go! That's the moment! Time to jump!

What if you don't take it?

Well, it's a bit embarrassing to come back down in the plane, isn't it!

but you can always try again.

When you do jump it will be exhilarating and you'll have a story to tell!

It's a bit like evangelism.

Speaking up will always have some risk,

but with good preparation

and with a willingness to speak and act when the moment comes,

then life can be a bit more exciting.

Let's pray for some more excitement.