

What's the best news you heard this week? Alytheia is here? Britain has 19 gold medals? Britain has more gold medals than Australia? Everyone loves a bit of good news. (I guess that's why everyone loves Christians!)

Christians are good news people! Some time ago each of us heard the good news of God. Having believed, we received a common mission: to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28) and we received the help of the Missionary Spirit of God. The same Spirit that carried Paul the Apostle across the known world. Jesus' request is simple: **let him who hears say, "Come!"**

We may be an odd bunch, but Paul reminds us that: God "has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corin 5:20) It is an astounding honour. Despite our brokenness God has authorised us to represent him. But authority comes with responsibility. A challenge to ensure we represent him well.

So ambassadors, how are you making God's appeal? When did you last tell someone the good news? Imagine the British Ambassador to Bali. A mansion in a gated compound, a deckchair, a Mai Tai, a sea breeze, maybe a massage. No work per se: the boss is 15,000 miles away and no one likes the British in Bali. God's ambassadors have gone A.W.O.L. We are failing in our commission as ambassadors and those we have been sent to are perishing. God forgive us.

We cannot make disciples unless we tell them the good news. The people will perish without the good news. Paul asks: How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Rom 10:14-15)

We thank God with joyful hearts but forget to tell the world why. We say yes Lord, yes Lord, yes, yes Lord, but hardly give our commission a thought. I believe our joy and thanksgiving is real and I am sure we all want to share the good news. What's going wrong? Is it fear or laziness or selfishness or inexperience?

Fear is an obstacle. It stops us sharing in the moment and the more we give in to it the more we are bound by it. We can break this fear. Paul was able to say "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom). And he could urge Timothy: "do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (2 Timothy).

People will not always respond well to the gospel. Paul was imprisoned for the gospel. But He also took the gospel across the world, established thriving churches in a single visit, met with God in the third heaven and knew God like

perhaps no other man. If this kind of service is not worthy of us we are not worthy of Him who suffered for us.

Laziness and selfishness can cause us to focus on ourselves so much we forget about those around us. And if we never tell people the gospel, there's a good chance we are not very good at it doing so.

We can break the restrictive power of fear, laziness, selfishness and inexperience by actually doing the work. If we fix our eyes on Jesus and step out in faith, he will enable us to speak. In time, we may get good at it. **So ambassadors, what is the gospel?**

Shall we seek a gospel formula?

A classical summary of the gospel includes 3 elements:

- 1 All people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)
- 2 The penalty for sin is death (Rom 6:23)
- 3 Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty our sins deserve (Rom 5:8)

It begins with our context, we are all in the same boat; we have all sinned and are subject to the penalty. It declares the good news: that Jesus has paid the penalty. And so it highlights Jesus' death, which both explains and provides evidence for the wonderful news of God's grace to us: that Jesus died so we can live.

Clearly, this kind of summary is scriptural. And Paul uses a similar summary in some of his letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians (15) Paul summarised the gospel he preached as follows: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures".

In his second letter to Corinth, He summarises the gospel in the most beautiful terms. This message "is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 corin 15)

Again, the death of Christ is offered to explain the gospel. By his death, God reconciled us to himself, so he need not count men's sins against them. We are not representing a Mugabe, claiming all is well while the people perish. We represent the Kingdom of love, whose King gave his life to make peace with his

world. The message we carry on Christ's behalf is this: Oh, dear world be reconciled to God.

In each summary, Christ's death and resurrection are the centre of the good news. The summaries are very fine things. The problem comes when the summary becomes a formula. An all-purpose definition of the gospel.

There are number of problems with a gospel formula:

- (i) it tragically limits the greatness of God revealed by the whole bible;
- (ii) it limits his salvation (a) in application, to those aware of their sin and (b) in benefits, to forgiveness;
- (iii) it is insensitive and inflexible to the needs of the audience;
- (iv) it is trite and, therefore, may be delivered rather boring or as if it is a magic cure, once delivered, however delivered, effective to bring faith; and
- (v) subject to situations where it is relevant (Paul follows the formula good effect in speaking to the Antioch synagogue) it is arguably unscriptural. Jesus never used a gospel formula but rather spoke to the people in terms of the needs he perceived they had.

Evangelicals have a tendency towards formulas - reducing Christianity to a ten point plan. Even Alpha is something of a formula and the 'Why did Jesus die?' talk contains a gospel summary similar to this. Although, it does explain 3 other reasons Jesus died.

And, I note 3 other virtues of Alpha which contradict the formula approach: (i) it presents a pretty broad picture of God over 10 sessions; (ii) it encourages people to think for themselves and (iii) perhaps above all, it creates a situation where relationships can develop through the church walls.

Beyond a gospel formula... to the heart of the gospel.

I'm frustrated by our inability to get the good news out. I long to see us sharing the heart of the gospel with London. And I fear the gospel formula idea is not helping.

In 1992, the CoE commissioned an extensive survey written up by John Finney as Finding Faith Today. Respondents were asked to identify any part of the Christian message they found particularly helpful when turning to God. There were no tick boxes, people could write what they wanted. These are the results:

TABLE

John Finney notes how few people mention the cross and forgiveness of sin. Just 21 per cent. Apparently, 4/5ths of people did not find the cross and forgiveness the most appealing part of our faith. The same survey found that

61% of people felt no sense of guilt when they came to faith. Clearly the good news is by no means confined to the message of sin and forgiveness, even amongst those who become Christians.

I believe we need to broaden our conception of God and the terms of our gospel message and be more sensitive, relevant and creative. I suggest we consider the gospel summary not as a formula but rather a signpost to the heart of the gospel. The gospel summary points to the love and grace of God which are the heart of the good news.

The cross is central. Repentance is essential. But the cross has wider significance than the forgiveness of sin and repentance is more than saying sorry. I believe the classic gospel summary shrinks God. The Creator of the universe is more than just a saviour, as glorious as that is.

An Athens gospel for 21 Century London (modelling the model)?

There are only 2 full examples of Paul's evangelistic addresses in the bible. The message he gave in the Antioch Synagogue and his message to the Areopagus, the Athenian council.

Antioch shows us Paul's style before a Jewish audience. It is stuffed with biblical references; it gives an account of the life of Jesus and the Jewish reaction to him. And it ends proclaiming the life and justification to be attained by faith in Christ. Each element of the classic gospel summary is present.

But in Athens, Paul's gospel is radically different. I believe Paul's Athens address is a model for communicating the gospel to the unchurched 21st Century. I am not offering an alternative formula! I am just trying to identify the principles of communication Paul uses.

I fear we have assumed that the good news that is appropriate for Antioch is also appropriate for Athens? To the Jews Paul focused on Old Testament prophecy and the classic gospel truths. But elsewhere, he varied his style and content to present the good news in insightful and relevant terms. We must change our approach to suit our audience: clearly we need a different style and technique for a youth meeting than for a bunch of academics. But I am suggesting a change of content as well as style. The Athens gospel is greatly different in content to the Antioch gospel.

ATHENIAN PRINCIPLES – TABLE

I have studied Jesus' message to the Samaritan woman at the well and found evidence of the same principles. Both messages are: sensitive and relevant to the audience, destroy strongholds of misunderstanding that prevent people coming to God, expand rather than limit the mystery and greatness of God and his salvation, speak creatively in the language of the audience and offer the gift of salvation.

And I don't believe Paul had just one Athen's message. I think he was ready to adapt to his audience. Can we learn to adapt too? I have some suggestions:

EXAMPLE – TABLES

Hopefully you understand what I am suggesting. What other gospels could we present? The God of Service (an invitation to join in his work in a suffering world), the God of Laughter (an invitation to enjoy life with him); a God of Ministry (an invitation to let him work through us to others), the God of Glory (and invitation to let him touch our lives with his glory, the God of Healing (an invitation to let him touch our wounds), God the Father (an invitation for the orphaned to experience the love of a Father). The more we think about God the more wondrous and wideranging his being appears.

A note on the non-verbal method

Today, I wanted to focus on the style and content of our gospel message but before I conclude just a note on the importance of relationship evangelism.

Finding Faith today found that 80 per cent. of Christians came to faith primarily as a result of a relationship with a Christian. Interesting, only _ of that 80 per cent referred to a relationship with just one person. There is unspeakable power in relationships and there is nothing like including non-Christians in our midst for showing them the gospel.

Our community can communicate the good news much more powerfully than words. We can, for example, convey our hospitable God by the hospitality we share at CJ's and offer those around us. This is especially true in a post-Christian, post-Modern (i.e. post reason) world. People respond to what they feel and what they see in the lives of others. Jesus was hip to the post-modern ethic. He understood the power of relationship evangelism. You remember he declared that people would know we followed Him because by our love for each other.

Conclusion - There's a time and a place for the Antioch Gospel. Perhaps for your friend who goes to church once in a while, who's aware of Christian concepts but not how the gospel fits them together. Or for a Muslim, who speaks religious language and may connect with the pillar of our faith.

But lets renounce the one size fits all gospel. Lets not shrink God and his offer of salvation. Like Paul and Jesus, lets vary the message according to who we address.

Lets start practicing the principles of the Athen's gospel.

We need to learn to listen. How well do you know your colleagues? Do you know their hearts, their needs, their struggles? We must discern people's needs by the Spirit.

We need to understand the world. To challenge the world view and build upon it, we must first understand it. What does London really think? The fit survive, give me my rights, look after number one, everything is true, nothing is true? What underlies day to day life? What is the spiritual terrain under the shiny skyscrapers? God has something to say about all of this. Mentally, Paul walked side by side with the Areopagus as long as possible.

But Paul had sufficient confidence in the gospel to argue the case for it. He was not scared to confront different opinions. We must learn to confront and expose the deficiencies of celebrity, status and money as unemotionally, respectfully and challengingly as Paul could?

We need to treat others with respect. We may be hurt by the injustice we see around us but we must overcome the emotions that injustice causes. We do not need to win the argument for God. We only need graciously invite people to consider Jesus. Our emotions must not get in the way. Our attitude should be as Paul who made himself "a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."

We must learn a relevant language. To meet people's needs in terms they can respond to.

My thoughts today are just a beginning. At best, a signpost. Thought and practice are required to make them matter. Every day, as we experience God we should consider how to communicate his person to others. And tell them! If you're interested in rediscovering the gospel for London, lets meet. We could share our progress as ambassadors, consider how to connect with London and pray.

My hope is that CJ's contend as one man for a wider gospel, in terms people can respond to, backed up by worthy behaviour. Lets make CJ's the good news people.

i WILL PRAY – TIME TO CONSIDER ONE COMMITMENT (study my examples, tell someone a relevant gospel by the end of next week, pray for so and so, whatever)