

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Lent talk 2016

Not long after I became Bishop of Barking I emailed Bishop Stephen to ask him to send me the Diocesan mission strategy documents which I had misplaced when moving house. He did so, but in the email he also said: "Peter, please don't worry too much about the details of the strategy, simply love God, love people and tell them about Jesus." That has been imprinted on my heart and outlook ever since: love God, love people and tell them about Jesus.

And that at its simplest is **EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM**: telling people about Jesus, because we love them and we love God.

Or do we? The challenge at the heart of effective evangelism is do we love God enough and do we love people enough to tell them about Jesus. A commitment to effective evangelism comes out of love, not fear: so said the Archbishop of Canterbury recently. And he said more, something I really like in this social media age. He said, "Evangelism and witness is not an app. Apps are simply add-ons, optional extras, suited to those with particular interests and activities. No, evangelism is the operating system."

For us, who would be disciples of Jesus, evangelism is and must be a priority - out of love and because it is the very essence of the kingdom of God.

So I want share with you, the Why, What and How of Effective Evangelism as I see it! But first I want to invite you to think about it practically. Many people are frightened of the whole concept and business of evangelism:

WHY?

I began with the why: out of love. Out of love for God and love for people. Paul says "For Christ's love compels us..." *2 Corinthians 5: 14-15*. St Augustine said, "We do not come to God by navigation but by love." In Jesus, we have been given the greatest love gift of all and as faithful disciples we are called to pass him on to others. He is gift, and this is where our new tool comes in: The Transforming Presence Gift Box – Unwrapping God's Gift!

Secondly, because Jesus said so: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations....." *Matthew 28:19*.

Evangelism is also this: Oftentimes the church boxes us in. We get so caught up with ministry inside the church we don't get outside. In fact we easily lose contact and connection with non Christians. How many non-Christian friends do you have?

Have the number reduced over the years? We have got to get out of the box of the church. Scientists tell us that if you place a group of fleas in a jam jar, put on the lid and leave them for 3 days, they will learn not to hit their heads against the lid trying to jump out! When the three days are up you can take off the lid and they will not jump out, and neither will their offspring. It is learned behaviour! We have too often learned to be boxed inside the church, making real witness for Christ much less possible! Are you itching now? We need to get out of the confines of the church if we are to effectively share the Gospel. **Go....**

Does anyone know the original meaning of the word *parish*? It is a saxon word that derives from the Greek *paroiki, meaning* "the people outside the walls". The call is to go, to get outside of the walls of the church. A parish church should be a mission and evangelism centre! Justin Welby recently said, that it is not about church attendance, church growth or the survival of the church: rather evangelism is a matter of obedience and discipleship. We are **formed in order to be sent**.

The third why is because lost people matter to God. When my daughter Sally was 2 years old, Ellen and I lost her in Stretford Shopping Centre. For 10 minutes I ran the length, up and down. As the endless time ticked by my head spun and my heart physically ached for my lost child. Until with huge relief I saw her fascinated by the fish in a large fish tank, 100 metres from where I had first put her down. God our Father's heart aches at so many lost children. You have never looked eyes with someone who does not matter totally and absolutely to God!

And God, the Father rejoices when one lost one is found and brought back home. We know this from the 3 parables of the Lost sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. And let's get away from the old-fashioned picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd holding a fluffy white baby lamb. They are not the ones that tend to run away, rather it's the grisly, rebellious rams that do!

Jesus is the one who searches for the one lost sheep, the lost son.... So should we with him. Jesus defined his mission by saying, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost". *Luke 19: 10* He didn't simply say that he came to save the lost, but that he came to seek and to save them. That is, before the lost can be redeemed, they must first be sought. Evangelism must be intentional, built into the operating system of every disciple, of every church!

The story is told that before one of his famous tent crusades in England in the 1950s Billy Graham needed to post an important letter. As a stranger in town he stopped a young girl and asked, 'Please could you tell me the way to the post office?'

The girl duly directed him. Then he said to her, 'If you want to find the way to God, why don't come to the big tent in the park tonight and I'll tell you.'

'I think not,' said the girl, 'you don't even know the way to the post office!'

So what about us, can we point people to God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

So 3 reasons why evangelism must be our priority:

- Out of love for God and for his people
- Because Jesus mandated us to seek and to save
- Because lost people matter to God and they should to us.

WHAT?

In the opening of his Gospel, Mark seeks to introduce us to 2 things: serious good news and regime change

The message is *Euangellion*: the proclamation of good news, a good message. The context is of a herald from an ancient king bringing immense good news eg Pheidippides. He in effect was an evangelist, a herald, proclaiming good news of a Greek victory over the Persians at the Battle of Marathon -and if you know the story it cost him! For us there is not just any good news but the most stupendous news of all. This was an announcement that changed everything. If this message is true, it has to change everything. That's where the regime change comes in: Jesus, came into

Galilee, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news." *Mk 1:14,15*. Regime change: human rule to God's rule, my kingdom to God's Kingdom.

Now let's be clear on one thing: of course evangelism involves both words and actions. But in saying this let me kill off one misinterpretation at source: For evangelism to be effective words are essential. It is proclamation. That's what Jesus did, that's what the apostles did. We need to tell the story of Jesus and how it relates to our own story and journey through this life. In this context the words of Francis of Assisi are often quoted: "preach the Gospel: use words if you must!" Well yes, but also no! Firstly there is no evidence Francis ever said those words! Secondly words of proclamation – good news story telling are essential.

I wouldn't be here if words had not been used. My friend Rosemarie Jones' life changed and I saw that regime change unfold before my eyes. But if she hadn't told me why: it was because she had become a Christian, my own life would not have been challenged by the story of the risen Jesus. Likewise, I suggest most of you would not be here. Faithful Christian actions by someone may have been a trigger, or played a part in your faith journey, but actions are simply not enough! "And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?" *Romans 10: 14 (The Message)* Words are essential somewhere along the line! .The Good News must be proclaimed

Of course our lifestyle and action must back up our words if our witness and evangelism is to be effective. Authenticity matters. I like this catchy and challenging verse:

You are writing a Gospel, a chapter each day,
by deeds that you do and the words that you say.
Others read what you write, whether faithless or true.
So, what is the Gospel according to you?" *Paul Gilbert*

You are a witness whether you intend to be or not! How are you good news to the neighbour? "Every Christian must become Christ to his neighbour." *Martin Luther*. Or let me put it another way: How are you a transforming presence? How is your life being changed daily by Jesus such that your very presence begs questions of those who know you? Which is what Rosemarie Jones was for me....

And remember we are not on our own in this. We are given power by the Holy Spirit to do just that to proclaim the Gospel by words and actions. You have the power! God gives you the power of his Spirit to speak good news, to be good news. He promised, so take him at his word: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" *Acts 1: 8*

HOW?

For some people Evangelism has a bad reputation because it conjures up ideas of insensitivity and even intimidating people to believe. That's not what the Bible teaches us about evangelism. So how does the scripture teach evangelism?

3 things, all encompassed in my favourite verse for evangelism: "In your hearts honour Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the

hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.” 1 Peter 3:15. For this we go back to the contents of our Transforming Presence Gift Box!

1. *In your hearts honour Christ as Lord* **Set of darts.**

God is the evangelist, you are a witness. We need to exercise intentional, targeted prayer. How many of family and friends are outside the faith and the church? How often do you pray for God to convict them?

2. *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* **Bubbles**

Be prepared! We need to be willing and prepared to be telling our story. How often have you taken opportunity to share your story with those family friends? Everyone has a story and everyone’s story of faith is different shapes and sizes like these bubbles, yet each is rounded and but encompassed by Jesus and filled with his spirit and power, reflecting his life in us. As a parish priest I used to encourage church members to learn to tell their faith stories in 2 minutes or in 200 words.

Not all of us have a story of coming to faith in some gradual or decisive way. Especially if you have grown up in faith within God’s Church you may not, but you will have stories of how God has and is working in your life. Tell those when the opportunity presents itself.

3. *yet do it with gentleness and respect.* **Slippers & crown**

Not just what you say it's the way that you say it! *With gentleness and respect.* Not forcing it, button holing people... but approaching them sensitively and gently and treating them like royalty – reverently!

Above all start where they are and you are, Listen first and move on and out from there. I once heard another bishop speak on evangelism and he said: “Go and tell, but not until you've been and listened.” We must earn the right to speak of Jesus. Effective evangelism is usually relational (eg St Luke’s on the Market Place in Walthamstow)

Let me come back to that issue of fear:

- Some fear that they don’t know enough to evangelize. Then tell them what you do know. And you must know your own story of faith! He who has an experience need not fear him who has an argument. *Bishop Stephen Neil*
- Some people fear it won’t work. It’s not your job to make it work. Remember in the end only God is the evangelist. Only his Spirit can convict and convert.
- Your job is to be a witness: to listen, to go and tell, to invite. Then it is job done. This is not about success, it’s about invitation and direction. Not everyone accepted Jesus invitation!

For too long, we've called unbelievers to invite Jesus into their lives! Yes, of course I understand that and I did it myself at the age of 20. But it may be far more powerful to explain that Jesus calls them into his life. “Come and see”, he said to the first disciples, “follow me....” And his life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable.

Archbishop Justin also said this recently: "All Christians are witnesses of the love of Jesus Christ. The Spirit comes to us for precisely this task. And as witnesses of Jesus we then become witnesses to Jesus, relaying what we have experienced to others. This is our duty, our privilege and our joy.

There is nothing like it. There is nothing as wonderful as seeing God at work leading people from darkness to light."

A final point: We need to listen and discern the cultures in which we live to be effective in evangelism.

There are now 2 road bridges over the River Severn, connecting England and Wales. Why? Because times have changed! The new one is in a different place and is much longer than the old. Likewise the gap between the church and our communities has widened. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Said Jesus to the disciples, before his ascension. *Acts 1:8*

- Jerusalem is the church. Some inside need to hear.
- Judea is the fringe. Most of our evangelism happens with the 20% of the population we have some contact with.
- Samaria is the de-churched, those who once had contact but have rejected Christian faith/the church and no longer connect.
- the ends of the earth is the unchurched: those who have never had any connection. There is huge opportunity there to present Jesus fresh into peoples' lives.

With latter two in particular we need to be more intentional and even provocative! How do we do that? By blessing!

No longer is the pattern to discipleship: believe, behave, belong but rather bless, belong, behave, believe. When the church takes a small step in blessing its community and culture with kindness, help and opportunity God tends to show up!

Last year's political elections tell us people feel left behind by the government. How does that parallel the church? Often the church is offering the answer Jesus when the community is not asking about him. The church needs to be a provocative organisation that blesses and causes people to ask why are these people doing this: running night shelters, food banks, sheltering asylum seekers and refugees, being loyal radicals? We need as churches to be intentional:

- Growing our contacts and relationships with our community and serving them in large and small ways.
- We need to have regular and frequent evangelistic events.
- Nurture courses to help people explore faith.
- And not just taking opportunity to share our faith with our friends and neighbours but creating opportunities!

That is **effective evangelism**, that is being a **transforming presence**.