

What makes you – as a follower of Jesus – different from most other people in the world?

Is that a difference that matters?

How does it matter?

Is that a difference that's worth sharing?

How might you go about sharing that difference?

That's what this brief time together is all about. I don't see it – or intend it – to be a time of great theological or Biblical learning, nor a session with wads of handouts and theory, but more about discovering some things you already instinctively know and hence ideas you will – hopefully – feel happy to put into action **and** to help others put into action!

Once you've discovered you *can* do something, it becomes easier; you become more confident; and you *are* more confident about letting others know what worked for you and might work for them. Can you remember how you learnt to ride a bike? Once you'd learn how to do it, you've never forgotten – and it even seems impossible that anyone else needs to learn: it's so simple. Driving a car? And so much else in life. And maybe even friendship evangelism.

By the way, if you look up friendship evangelism on the internet, you'll find lots of very critical stuff there. It doesn't work; it's a waste of time or it's just a theologically liberal subversion of confrontational evangelism, where you just hit 'em with the gospel and let God do the rest. Let me admit that many different forms of evangelism do bring people to God, but some of those forms of evangelism also turn many others **away** from God.

If I hadn't inherited the title to this workshop – Friendship Evangelism – I think I'd have wanted just to talk about Relational Evangelism: sharing the Good News of Jesus through relationships: family; friends, acquaintances, maybe those who you meet on a bus, a train or a plane and may never see again.

And I'm not going to take time to debate the issues. We need to get on with the understanding of friendship evangelism I'm going to share.

We'll begin with the *easy stuff*.

Why do people – apart from being brought by their church-going parents as children – come to church for the first time?

- Worship?
- Music?
- the church building maybe at the centre of your community's life?
- Is it the preacher – the relevance, attractiveness and power of his preaching?
- Is it the sheer beauty of the church building?
- Is it the advertising? TV; radio; magazine; newspaper?

- Is it just plain old “word of mouth”?

What do you think?

Turn and make yourselves into groups of four – with three other people certainly NOT from your own Unit or your own country and especially NOT from your own congregation. Talk about what you think brings people to your church for the first time. You have EIGHT MINUTES: two minutes to quickly introduce yourself, tell the others where you come from, the size of your congregation and whether it’s growing larger or growing smaller. Then you have just SIX MINUTES to share what you think brings people to your congregation for the FIRST time.

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I need some report-back.

Research out of the United States and Canada shows that between 70 and 90% of first-comers are there as first-time attenders because they are **INVITED**. Someone asks them to come to their congregation to discover for themselves what it is that is meaningful to the person who’s extended the invitation. The *might* talk about the Worship, the Music, the Church Buildings, the Preacher, the Architecture, but they *invite* the family member, the long-time friend or even the short-term acquaintance to come, see, hear and experience for themselves what their congregation has to offer. My Church, the Uniting Church in Australia is in serious decline. We could be the first major denomination in Australia to die.

The congregation I attend is growing. One of the reasons may be that things are beginning to change. Ann got talking five weeks ago with a young mother who was there for the first time. One of the young mums who attended our church met her at swimming lessons for their children. They became friends. Kate **invited** her to church.

People come MAINLY because they’re **invited**.

BUT what happens when they get there?

I’d like 10 volunteers.

NINE of you, quickly make yourselves into a group of friends at church.

Your task in this little piece of action is to keep the tenth person out. That’s it. Do whatever you need to do to keep the tenth person OUT.

DO IT!

Right! That’s enough.

How easy was it to keep out? You can do it without thinking. You’re naturals. It takes no thinking, no special skills. You can do it.

Now,, how did that make you feel? Did you feel welcomed? Loved? Part of the fellowship of followers of Jesus? Would you come back?

The trouble is that things like that happen much too often in our congregations. Most of us are KEEP OUT specialists. When we get with our friends we direct our attention to them. We forget about the newcomers and make it difficult for them to fit in.

Let me share some experiences Ann and I have had.

This happened more than 40 years ago when we were living in America – and we've *not* forgotten. We went to a church somewhat to the north of here in another state. We were on holiday from Los Angeles and had holiday clothes for hot weather. As an Australian I wore what in Australia we'd call dress-shorts and long socks. So did the boys. Ann and the girls wore summer-weight dresses. It was a mistake: a *bad* mistake in more ways than one. For a start the church was air-conditioned and we froze. and it was apparent that our style of dressing did *not* meet with approval. At the door as we came out, the minister was in conversation with someone else. He continued to look at him, and talk with him, as he thrust out his hand and shook my hand.

When we got back to Los Angeles there was the letter of friendly welcome, thanking us for coming and looking forward to us coming again.

Guess what we thought!

Ann and I went to another large, prosperous church which had three choirs and a bell choir. We were welcomed at the door and handed the bulletin. No enquiry as to who we were or where we were from. After the service we were about to walk away when Ann decided to go back and let the minister know what she felt about the "welcome." World President and a senior Pastor from Australia!

The following year Ann was back in the same city and went back deliberately to see whether things had changed. They hadn't!

On the other hand, she was in Singapore. As she approached the entry, women came from the welcome desk. "Was this the first time? It's 15 minutes until the service begins. Would you like a cup of coffee? Would you like to see any part of the building?" She chose the museum. One of the women went with her to answer any questions. Then the same woman took her into church and introduced her to one of the ministers. After the service they met her at the door of the church and asked her if she'd like a cup of coffee – and invited her to come again." And it wasn't because they knew she was Federation World President. Ann said *nothing* about her role in the church. The women of that church still don't know. She was just a visitor.

We need to overcome our natural *expertise in keeping people out and driving them away*.

We need to be welcoming, friendly, hospitable.

What does that mean in your situation?

Now, quickly reform the groups of four you made before. You already know something about each other's congregations and what brings people there for the first time. You have SIX MINUTES to share what you *are* doing or *could be* doing to welcome newcomers, make them feel they could become part of your fellowship and might even become members.

Again, some report-back.

So, we need a welcome desk, if we're a large congregation; a welcoming team; or greeters.

The first thing I'd want to say is that however many are part of the team, each one of them needs not to be shy and uncomfortable with what they're asked to do. It shows – and the welcome may seem unnecessarily contrived.

My next question is: Does the welcomer merely shake hands and say welcome – or do they proceed to introduce them to members of the congregation?

What does that imply? Yes, there needs to be a team. If a greeter takes a newcomer off to introduce them to someone else or to get a cup of coffee, some other team members need to be back at the door.

But we need to think about what happens next.

You can be welcoming, friendly and open to newcomers, but what about your worship and music?

Does the first-timer have to learn the language of worship? Is your bible reading in another language? And I don't mean a language other than the local language. Is it in some form of special Biblical language foreign to most people outside the church?

Grace is one of the loveliest words I know in the Christian language. But what does it mean to those outside the church? Justification. Redemption. Salvation. Sanctification. You *may* know what those words mean, but how would you answer me, if I asked you about the eschatological significance of the ontological event? Would it make any difference if I asked you about the ontological significance of the eschatological event?

Let's learn to use language which is accessible right from the beginning. Why should a newcomer not be presented with the most profound aspects of the Christian faith in the simplest of language? Why should we *expect* them to *learn* our "language" to become followers of Jesus?

Our worship should be newcomer friendly; adult friendly; family friendly; child friendly.

Is our worship actually "open" to new-comers and first-time visitors; "welcoming" to new-comers and first-time visitors; "understandable" to new-comers and first-time visitors?

Should our worship regularly – or every time we meet – include a passing of the peace and an opportunity to meet those who may be service acquaintances rather than friends, as well as the newcomers or sometimes-comers?

Is our worship ho-hum; hum-drum; or wow! Is it regularly like that? Always like that? Does it need variety to appeal to everyone?

Does it have appeal to the senses which dominate our personalities? We are NOT all the same. Some are visually dominant. They “see” what’s at stake. Other are hearing dominant. They “hear” the argument. Still other are sensory dominant. They “feel” the point. Our worship needs to include sights and sounds and experiences. Otherwise what we have to share, they might not see, might not hear, might not feel, might not “understand.”

My next-to-last questions for this session?

What happens next?

Does someone make sure that the visitor is made to feel welcome over a cup of coffee and a bite to eat? Are they warmly invited to come back again? When they’re next in the area? Whatever?

Does the visitor get a warmly welcoming card through the mail?

But, if they’re residents from nearby, does someone follow up with a visit to their house?

Let me say this: The advice I had about this is that it should **NOT** be the minister – but a layperson who merely calls to say little more than thanks for coming and leaves a *small* gift of appreciation – but is ready, if need be, to stay a little longer to listen, listen, listen.

And my final question is: What happens next?

What does your church about fellowship pray and Bible study groups for new-comers? What forms of *discipling* does it have? Does your congregation really believe that new-comers to the faith will learn about the Christian faith merely by coming to worship and hearing sermons?

Let me finish this part of our time together by saying that I know I’ve thrown lots of questions at you. I **don’t** have all the answers. Those I must leave to you. You know your own situations. You have answers for your situations – and those answers will be very different from mine.

But I will also say this. have you ever thought how little academic teaching Jesus did?

What Jesus did was to tell simple, incredibly memorable stories and to ask questions.

And what do we do? We preach sermons and supply answers!

For those who wonder what discipling might mean, can I suggest you look no further than Cokesbury’s DISCIPLE FAST TRACK.

For those who want a little more on being a welcoming group find the following on the internet: **4 Steps to a Friendlier Church (The G.I.F.T. Plan)**

[If there had been the possibility of showing a video it would have been *Where the hell is Matt?* The point of showing the video is to see how matt gathers the crowd. In the video I choose you see matt training others to indulge in his dance. He *invites and trains.*]

So far in our time together I've assumed some things:

- You know you are called. If you are Christian, you **are** called.
- You know you are co-workers with God. If you are Christian, you **are** called to work with God. While we are called to mission, it is God's mission and we are co-workers with God.

What I can assume some other things: you have ears, eyes, hands and feet, and a heart which could all be used for sharing the Good News of Jesus and his mission.

What I can't assume is that you will use your ears to listen and **hear**, eyes to notice and **see**, hands to offer help and actually **put to work**, or feet to go **where you are needed**.

Nor can I assume you have a heart for any or all of this.

What I do know is that as followers of Jesus, baptised or not, you have been given abilities and gifts to use as his followers – to use for the sake of the world. Some people see a whole range of “spiritual gifts” within the Old Testament and New Testament – as many as 29. One of these is evangelism: sharing the good news.

Now let's get honest at this point. Some easily mix with people, are open, and can share *anything!* They could easily be evangelists. Others are shy and reticent in their dealings with others. They find the idea of being evangelists difficult and threatening. AND THEY FEEL GUILTY, because they've been told that **every** follower of Jesus is called to be a co-worker with God in sharing the Good News of Jesus.

NOT everyone has the gift of preaching; but there are times when we can **all** speak about Jesus. NOT everyone has the gift of leadership, but there are times when we **all need** to take initiative like a leader. Not everyone has the gift of intercessor, but there are times when we can **all** plead with God in our prayers. And NOT everyone has the gift of evangelism – but there **are** times when we can **all** share the Good News of Jesus.

But let me say again, if you find that hard, DON'T feel guilty.

I hope that I can share ways to increase the ease with which you **can** share.

If I have to give you a definition of evangelism, it's this: a sharing of our experience and understanding of Jesus and what he has done for us – in the hope that others will find the same meaning and understanding for themselves. Evangelism of the start of a journey of helping others begin the journey of discipleship, the journey of discovering a new way of seeing God, hearing God, experiencing, and responding to God. But it's also the beginning of a journey of seeing the world in a new way and discovering how to respond to the world in a new way. It's the beginning of a journey of seeing and hearing and experiencing other people in a new way, and discovering how to respond to them in a new way. And maybe as much as anything else it's about understanding ourselves in a new way,

experiencing God, God's world and other people in new ways. And that's what we'd call the result of evangelism: conversion.

Let me first tell you a story.

It happened perhaps 50 years ago. I was a young minister, full of the bravado of the young and inexperienced.

I had gone with my senior minister to a meeting of ministers. I don't remember what we were discussing, but I guess I was exhibiting my scepticism about the views of my seniors. Suddenly the host swung on me and asked, "Well, John, who *is* Jesus for you?" I didn't know what to say.

The moment passed.

At morning tea Arthur came to me and said, "John, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Thank you, Arthur," I responded. Actually, you forced me to think through what I should have said. I could have responded by saying what was expected of me: Jesus, Christ, Messiah, Son of God, Saviour, Lord, Redeemer, Good Shepherd, Light of the World, Way, Truth and Life.... What I wanted to say *had to be in my own words*. You asked me who Jesus is for me. Having thought about it, I want to say this: without Jesus my life has no meaning. Jesus is purpose and meaning for me."

Maybe it wasn't a particularly smart answer, but it has guided me ever since.

And as I thought about over the next few years, I wanted to add this. If the last thing you would ever give up is your purpose for existence, the meaning of your being and life – in fact, your God, then, that is Jesus for me. Jesus is Son of God, God, for me.

Now, I want you to form groups of four, preferably with people you met yesterday and with whom you have already shared.

This time I want you to share with the other three members of your group who Jesus is for you.

BUT you must *NOT* use the normal Christian language. You must *NOT* talk about Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Redeemer, Christ, Messiah – or any of those other words that have either *NO* meaning to those outside the Christian fellowship or have a completely different meaning than you intend.

And those of you who are listening are to protest if you think the person telling you who Jesus is for her uses language which you think those outside the Christian community won't truly understand.

When person 1 is finished, it's person 2's turn; then person 3's; and finally person 4's.

I'm not sure how long you have for this exercise, I'll just try to assess when I think everyone has had a chance to express in their own words who Jesus is for them.

Again, some report-back.

I believe that if you can say – *in your own words* – who Jesus is for you, you are on your way to being able to witness to your faith without being churchy or even being misunderstood. It also means that you haven't had to learn and say by rote something that someone else has decided is the one and only way to evangelistic success.

What you *have* shared is what you *can* share. It's not a guaranteed form of words that leads to success. It's you honestly saying who Jesus is for you.

And it's that simple.

But let me get a little more theological.

In some ways you may have discovered how you can express something about the Incarnation – how God became a human being just like you and me and provided us with an understanding of God through that man Jesus, born just as we all have been, but 2,120 something years ago in Bethlehem of Judea. You've indulged in what theologians technically call Christology. If you went to a theological course on this subject, it would be called simply ***The Person of Christ***.

Through his stories and the stories about him this man Yeshu'a ben Ioseph has come to mean something more precious than life itself to us.

But when his followers try to say who he was they said other things about him.

Some people see a particular pattern in speeches from the early Christians in the Book of Acts.

In Chapter 2 Peter stands up on the Day of Pentecost and says:

“People of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, listen carefully to what I'm telling you.... Jesus, the Nazarene, a man clearly attested to you by God with powerful deeds, wonders and miraculous signs that God performed among you by him, as you already know, this man who was handed over by God's thought-through plan, you executed by nailing him to a cross at the hands of the Gentiles. But God raised him up, having released him from the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by its power.”

In the following Chapter Peter uses much the same language. And when arrested by the authorities, in Chapter 5, we hear Peter saying:

“God raised up Jesus, whom you seized and killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses to these things”

Some see a pattern:

1. What happened was God's plan;
2. Jesus was crucified;
3. Jesus was raised to life on the third day;
4. He was seen by many;
5. His followers are witnesses

You can call this the pattern of crucifixion, resurrection and the promise of forgiveness.

Followers of Jesus have struggled ever since those first witnesses to express the significance for themselves and the world of what happened.

Some have merely seen Jesus as some particular sort of martyr giving his life as an example of what price love will pay. And the resurrection as an affirmation that love is stronger than hate.

Others have seen Jesus as the Victor over the very worst that evil can do. Goodness is stronger than evil.

Still others believe sin has its cost and must be punished. In this case Jesus bears our punishment as the sacrificial lamb, and sin's price is paid.

Some will assert that Jesus' resurrection burst through the confines of death and is the opening to all believers of life beyond death. Life is stronger than death.

There is no one pattern and many weave the various strands of understanding into their own particular patterns.

So, we're on to another theological study of Soteriology and Atonement: ***The Work of Christ***.

If theologians weave their own patterns, now it's your turn to reveal your particular pattern – and however much you may assert that you don't have a pattern, let me assure you that you **do!**

If you thought the task of explaining who Jesus is for you this morning was tough, this is an even tougher task. And I can make no apology for that. It's the tougher part of friendship evangelism.

So I want you to think through what Jesus' death and resurrection mean to **you**.

Let me say this about COMMUNICATION.

It's NOT as easy as you think.

And I'd want to share with you a heading in an on-line article I read last week: "Love will keep you from using words not in [the] vocabulary of the person you're talking to].". And this: "Master communicators who really know their material can use simple words to get it across."

You have an idea in your head. You put that idea into words. But the words you choose for your idea depend on your past experience and the cultural patterning of the particular family, tribe, race, nation, political party or church from which you come.

You speak the words which have already gone through your particular filters.

Now the person to whom you've "broadcast" those words has his or her own filters.

For a start the most obvious filter is whether the person trusts you and can believe you. If they neither trust you nor believe you, your communication is already in trouble.

But they too have filters of their own past experience and cultural patterning from which they come.

So sharing an idea is not always straightforward. You need to present even the most precious and valuable ideas as simply as you can – and even the most complex ideas just as simply.

You need to try to take into account the person's background. Is the person old, of middle-age or a child? Would you take that into account? Are they thoroughly conversant with your language? Might they misunderstand what you're trying to say?

Never talk jargon – if you want to be understood by someone who won't understand your in-house language. In fact, I'd say avoid jargon altogether.

Please return to the groups of four you have been in earlier this afternoon.

This time I want you to share with the other three members of your group what Jesus' death and resurrection mean for you.

Again you are FORBIDDEN to use what you may or may not hear in church, the normal IN-HOUSE Christian language. You must NOT talk about Salvation, Redemption, Sacrifice, Jesus, as a substitute, sacrificed in our place – or any of those other words that have either NO meaning to those outside the Christian fellowship or have a completely different meaning than you intend. Talking of Jesus' blood washing us clean is just as forbidden: those outside the Christian community do NOT have our Biblical culture and do NOT understand the background that many in the church do.

And those of you who are listening are to protest if you think the person telling you what Jesus has done, does or will do for her uses language which you think those outside the Christian community won't truly understand. BUT you are NOT to argue with them, if you disagree with them. This is their expression of what they believe is true for them. If you have a different understanding, they will hear what you have to say and may be persuaded when your turn comes. Your *only* task as you listen is to steer them back to NON-CHURCH language.

When person 1 is finished, it's person 2's turn; then person 3's; and finally person 4's.

This is a harder exercise than this morning's, so I have no idea at all how long you will need for this exercise, I'll just try to assess when I think everyone has had a chance to express in their own words what is that Jesus has done for them, does for them now and will do for them into the future.

Again, some report-back.

Within what I have been having you do there has been what might be an undue emphasis on experience. We belong to the Wesleyan tradition which holds to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: a balance of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Hopefully what we share will be informed by all of those elements of our faith: grounded in Scripture; informed by the traditions of the whole church from the past and from today; confirmed by reason; and how things have worked out in our own experience.

Among the last things I want to say is this:

1. Never overcomplicate evangelism. Evangelism is you sharing with someone else – whether family, friend or acquaintance – what you know about Jesus and what he has done, is doing and will do for you.
2. The second thing is this: Don't be afraid to try. **Never** be afraid to try. And don't be afraid to fail. In fact, **never** be afraid to fail. Above all, don't be afraid to *succeed*. **Never, never** be afraid that you might just happen to succeed in introducing Jesus right into the centre of someone else's another life.
3. And remember the final words of what we call the **Great Commission**. 'All authority in heaven and on earth', he said, 'has been given to me! ¹So you must go and make all the nations into disciples. Baptize them in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit. Teach them to observe everything I have commanded you. And [take what I'm about to tell you with absolute seriousness]: I am with you, every single day, to the very end of the age.'¹

Some resources.

If you have access to the internet – and I'm sure most of you do – look up *Friendship Evangelism* and Evangelism on the web. Some of it may be useful!

Have a look on You Tube for:

- “The Who, Where, Why and What of Evangelism”
- “For those who don't enjoy Evangelism.”

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (p. 205). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Altered.