

The Same Gospel in an Ever Changing World

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everybody. Nice to see you. So yeah, this morning's talk is the same gospel in an ever-changing world. So as a country, and as the world, over the past 18 months at least, we've seen massive changes in this country.

Things that have not been great, but also things that we may have thought were not possible before. We've seen hundreds and thousands of people working from home, who knew what Zoom was before this past two years.

I've never heard of that before. And also lots of children being homeschooled. And here at Christchurch, along with every other church, we've had to adapt what we do. The ability to be able to meet together online has been a real blessing during the pandemic.

However, I'm really glad that we can actually meet physically back here now. And even without the pandemic, Christchurch has seen many changes over the past 20 years to how we do everything. I'm fairly new here, but is there anybody here that remembers this building before we had the building project? Yeah, quite a few of you. Yeah. So I've been kind of reading about that and looking at the journey that you guys took when you decided to join and be an LEP in 2005.

[1 : 20] And then when you finally came up to this beautiful building in 2012. And what a momentous day that must have been and how brave and courageous the congregation would have been at that time.

Because that will have cost people in so many different ways. But your vision was to change how you did mission and ministry and adapt the building so that you could do that well. And be a really useful body of believers for the local community here in Clevedon.

But whilst the form of church constantly changes, the Christian gospel and the reality of God does not change. It remains constant. And I think the psalm that Marilyn's just read is really good.

As a church coming out of lockdown, we may be evaluating our lives, our family life, maybe our jobs, our faith, how we do things at church, that kind of thing. And these four elements I'm going to talk about in a minute are key for us as disciples and worshippers of God.

Pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, and as we go into the future. So the first one is passion for the church. So what are you passionate about?

[2 : 30] What are you excited about? Has anybody got any really great hobbies or interests that they've got that they like to share with the world? Baking.

Brilliant. Lovely. What type of thing do you like baking? Fantastic. Lovely. Rhubarb and apple crumble.

I'm an archer. Oh, yeah, go on, Marilyn. Handbell ringing. Handbell ringing. Yeah, brilliant. Lovely. That's unusual. I love the archers and reading. Anybody else? Spending time with your wife.

Oh, spending time with your wife. Okay. That's very good. Bounty points there. Sheila, what about you? The archers. The archers. Yeah, that's right. Yeah, me too.

Archers addict. Great. So, we're all passionate about something and we've all got things in our lives that we love to share. And it's really good. It makes the world a more interesting place when we're all passionate about different things.

[3 : 27] As Christians, we're all called to be passionate about something as well. We're called to be passionate about God and his church. Now, for many people, even those that are regular attenders, the thought of being passionate about church might be a bit of a weird idea.

Each one of us is drawn to come and worship here for our own reasons each week. For different reasons. But is passion for the church one of them? What is their passion to be about?

So, in the beginning of the psalm, it shows us that it's not exactly the church itself which we are to be passionate about, but actually what the church represents.

And most importantly, what the church contains and what it houses. So, what do I mean by that? So, in verses one and two, it says, So, in the Old Testament, Mount Zion is Jerusalem. And it's mentioned many times as the place where God dwells, which is why the temple was built there. It's also described here as the city of the great king. Not King David, but God the king, who rules over all the earth.

[4 : 41] And as we know, even today, Jerusalem is the focus of the Jewish faith and has very important political and religious importance to the Jewish people.

But there's also a sense here in which Jerusalem, or Mount Zion as it's called, acts as a metaphor for something much greater that's going to come. Throughout the Bible, there's loads of examples where we can see that Jerusalem was considered to be a metaphor of God's presence with his people.

And prophets like Zechariah and Isaiah have written about it. But God's presence with his people eventually completely became realized on that first Christmas time.

When the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. So, the hope of Jerusalem and all that it stood for became ultimately realized in that person of Jesus Christ, who dwelt among us in human form.

And so, as Christians, there are a sense in which we believe the church to be the new Jerusalem. The community of God that we're all a part of. With Christ at the center. We're the citizens of the new Jerusalem.

[5 : 48] We're the members of the community of faith. And God dwells in the midst of us. So, we should be passionate about the church. But not because of the hymns or the sermons or the liturgy.

But passionate about the church because it's the dwelling place of God. And he should be our focus. And we should have a passion for worshipping and serving God in spirit and in truth.

So, the form of church can change from generation to generation. How we do things. How we shape the building. The styles of worship can change. But God's presence is with us.

And it's constant. And it should be that and not our personal preference for how we do things that stir up our passion for the church. The second slide is concern for the persecuted.

So, as we'll know from reading the Old Testament, which is a history of the people of God. The Israelites were always under siege at one time or other from the nations that were around them.

[6 : 49] And they were constantly warring with people. And they were thrown back on relying on the strength of God to protect them and to give them the victory. So, in this psalm, we don't actually know which historical attack that they're referring to.

But the psalmist is clear that the victory belongs to God. Yes, the people of God overcame their enemies. But it was in the strength of God that they were victorious. And again, for us, I think this is a metaphor here for God.

Strengthening his people to help the church to continue and to flourish. And I think it can be hard for us here in the UK, in our current context, to recognise the importance of this.

Because to a large extent, bar the recent COVID restrictions, we can basically worship God when we want, how we want and where we want. Without any real fear of persecution.

But as we know, this has not been the case throughout history. Where many people in this country have been martyred for doing exactly what we're doing today. And sadly, as we've all been reminded starkly this week, this is definitely not the case in Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria and numerous other places in the world.

[8 : 03] Where our many brothers and sisters are being persecuted and killed for worshipping God. Something that I read this week, among the many things I've read, really challenged me.

And this is a quote from someone that's written to the evangelist, Christine Kane. It's an email. Who's in contact with the Christians in the underground church house movement.

So in a lot of these countries where there's persecution, there's Christians that are meeting underground. And it's growing really rapidly, but they've got such courage. And this email says, At the moment, we are praying desperately for friends on the ground in the house church movement in Afghanistan.

Where the Taliban are coming after all Christians. Their courage is immense. Most expect to meet Jesus face to face in the next two weeks.

It's a powerful reminder right now of what matters. And making every opportunity count for eternity. Most expect to meet Jesus face to face in the next two weeks.

[9 : 13] And they and we are driven on in the hope that one day God will show his victory in all its fullness and the faith of the martyrs. And the persecuted will be vindicated.

And the kingdom of God will flourish as a place of healing and peace. History bears witness to the fact that even though many have tried to silence the church throughout the centuries, it continues to grow and flourish through the blood of the martyrs.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ will always flourish. As a psalmist writes here, As we have heard, so have we seen. So we as a church must never take for granted the privilege we have of worshipping in God, in freedom and without fear.

And perhaps we need to think more deeply in the coming months and weeks about how we can support and encourage those in other parts of the world where there's persecution and martyrdom. We must pray and intercede for our brothers and sisters, yes. But perhaps also we can engage in a more active way with highlighting the evil of religious persecution and encouraging those who have the power to respond accordingly.

[10 : 18] I've just put a slide up of a few organisations that I know about. You guys probably know about other ones that work with people in persecuted countries. So Tear Fund, Open Doors, Christian Aid, and Release International Voice of Persecution.

So yeah. So you might want to Google those and have a look and see if you want to support any of those. So we're called to be passionate for the church and we're called to be prayerful for the persecuted.

And I think it'd just be really good as a group of Christians here to maybe just pray in unity and solidarity for them. So if you can stand, please do.

If not, stay seated. If we can lift up the names of those countries and the people that we're concerned about, we'll have a bit of silence and I'll just finish off in prayer.

So dear Lord, we lift up these countries to you now, Lord. We thank you that we're here and we can worship you freely. And I lift up to you Afghanistan at the moment, Lord. So dear Lord, as believers, we pray for your protection, your guidance and your supernatural strength for all those persecuted people.

[11 : 53] Knowing that God will triumph over evil in the end because Jesus came to show us the way and pay the price for sin. He's also coming back soon again. And thank you, God, that we are fortunate to live in a country where we can freely come and worship you and help us, like those people, to remember and live our lives so that we too are ready to meet Jesus face to face and to remember your promises to us.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. Amen. Please be seated.

Amen. Please be seated. All right. And then we come on to number three, a joyful faith. So as we acknowledge the reality of God's presence here with us today and the privilege we have to worship him in freedom, and as we let those truths sink into our brains, how could we not be joyful in our worship?

As it says in the psalm, So our church services on a Sunday are not something that we should just attend and passively sit and receive in and just let Clive or Russ do something up here.

Instead, we are the people of God coming together in the presence of God to remember his goodness and his faithfulness and to celebrate his forgiveness and healing and salvation and grace and love and to joyfully respond to all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

[13 : 28] God is raising up his people upon a mountain to be a people of praise high on the hill and to be the light of the world. So Christchurch, this is what we're here for.

We are metaphorically and physically a people that's on the top of a hill. And our acts of praise and thanksgiving can have a transformative effect on our community as we invite more people to join the church here at Christchurch and realise all that God has done for us and what it means to follow him so that we can have life in all its fullness.

We have a gospel to proclaim. We know the love of God in our lives. So let's be joyful about it and share the joy of our experience with others so that they can come to know the love of God for themselves too.

And finally, you'll be glad to know, we are a people with a story to tell. The psalmist ends this psalm with these words. Tell the next generation that this is God.

Our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever. Now that is a really simple instruction but it can be difficult for us to absorb the consequences of what this might mean because the truth is all of us want to be comfortable in church and do things the way that we like them to be done.

[14 : 44] Because after all, why would we attend a church that we don't enjoy? And that's a fair point. And I hope that by and large Christchurch is a church that we all feel fairly comfortable in and that we enjoy.

But this is not the end goal that we're working towards. The end goal of our purpose as a church is wrapped up in the final instruction. Tell the next generation that this is God.

That is what we're here for. That is what we must do. I like to think of the church, the history of the church that we're a part of as a relay race, just like that lady over there.

For a short period, you and I are handed the baton of the gospel and our task is to run as fast as we can with that baton before handing it on to the next runners in the race.

Essentially, our ministry together is all about legacy. What legacy will our generation of Christians in Britain leave? What will we leave at Christchurch? I had a visit just recently from a young and unchurched person that came up to church and was just kind of walking around.

[15 : 49] They'd been going through some tough times and they'd been in the building. They'd seen the two beautiful banners here they remarked on. The one that says, When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. And for I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear.

I will help you. And they wanted to know who this God was we were talking about and what these banners were doing there and what they meant and what we were doing at Christchurch.

And we chatted for some time and at the end, they asked for prayer. And this was a totally unchurched person that was drawn up the hill to our church. What's our legacy?

We need to be a church of extravagant and authentic welcome, of love and a place where anybody can really belong, no matter what their age is, whatever stage they are on their journey, and no matter what their background is.

A place where they can be introduced to Jesus and helped and supported to build a relationship with him in a meaningful way to them. And this is a challenge for all of us of our generation of Christians in this country.

[16 : 52] Are we to be more concerned about creating a place that we can enjoy for ourselves without any hope of passing it on to the next generation? Or will we run our leg of the relay and with enthusiasm hand the baton of faith on to the next generation of faithful Christians?

It's all about legacy, what we leave behind. And finally, as I just close, if we just put our mission statement up there, just have a little read.

So we're to be one in Christ, to grow more disciples, and to serve the community. And we're going to build and grow and reach out with the help of the Holy Spirit.

So our church does a lot of this stuff already. But if we're going to achieve all that we want to do there, we need to invest ourselves in the next generation of faith.

We need, as Christians, to model faithful living to new people that come in and to encourage them to take up the baton and run their own leg of the race. So let's be passionate about church.

[17 : 57] Let's pray for the persecuted. Let's be joyful in our faith. And let's tell our story. And as we do that, we will increasingly become more and more the missional and outward-focused and discipling church that we committed ourselves to be when we joined together.