

What Should We Do Then?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 December 2024

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] What should we do then? That was the question that the people put when they heard the proclamation of the coming of Jesus. How do you wake up in the morning?

I enjoy waking up to the sound of the BBC Radio 4 Today programme. Actually, there's two things in that last sentence that are not true.

One, I don't enjoy waking up. Two, actually I don't particularly enjoy listening to the news. But I do quite like the programme.

Except there's one bit of that programme that really gets on my nerves. And usually I've switched off the radio by this point. But in case I haven't, this is the point when I normally do switch it off.

It's the thought for the day. Now, the reason why that gets on my nerves so much, and by the way, I've heard people who've actually presented, who have actually presented the thought for the day previously, who have stopped doing it, say the same sort of thing, is that it's so bland, in my humble opinion.

[1 : 17] Now, there are some exceptions. In fact, I think there are some of the thought for the day episodes that are brilliant, excellent, absolutely fantastic. But on the whole, my own perception of it is that so often it seems that everything has to be distilled down to the most lowest common denominator of shared moral and philosophical truths, that you can't say anything that's going to be controversial, that's going to upset anybody, and therefore you can't say anything that's particularly interesting.

Jonathan Humphries himself apparently went on record as saying, we're going to hear someone tell us that Jesus was really nice.

And Justin Webb apparently has gone on record as saying, they are roughly all the same. If everyone was nicer to everyone else, it would all be fine.

Now, perhaps I'm being a little bit harsh, but the point I'm driving towards is this. The authentic biblical Christian gospel leaves no room to be bland and undisturbing.

See, I think the sad reality is that when people hear the word Christianity, they kind of think possibly, well, not true, but probably before they even get that far, just think, well, so what if it is?

[3 : 02] Because it is continually presented in such a way that seems so unchallenging, so undisturbing, that doesn't rattle your cage, that doesn't cause you to sit up and think and review your life choices.

It's just boring. I'm quite convinced that there are vast, vast, vast, vast, vast, vast numbers of people that will go nowhere near a church, not because they think that actually the message that is proclaimed about Jesus isn't true, but it just seems boring.

And they meet the claims of Jesus with, or their perceived claims of Jesus with, well, so what?

When we hear properly the message of the gospel, if the message of Jesus and his claims, the claims of the Christian gospel are proclaimed faithfully for what they actually were and are in the New Testament, there is no space for a shrugging of the shoulders and a so what?

Because when we hear it, it evokes a demand, a response. The very question that the first generation of hearers made, which was, what should we do then?

[4 : 33] What should we do? And that's a question for every single one of us to ask every day of our lives when we hear the gospel proclaimed, well, then what should we do?

How do we respond to that? Because Christian faith is a practical faith. It's not just something that you, you know, you subscribe to a set of obscure theological propositions.

It's where the rubber hits the road. It changes the way we live our lives. It changes the way we see everything. It changes the way we make decisions. So what should we do then?

And we may not always like what it's going to say to us. When we hear the Christian gospel proclaimed faithfully, clearly and authentically, there will be some things that we'll need to stop doing.

And there will be some things that we'll need to step up to the mark and start doing. And those things may not be comfortable listening. There's an old story about a pastor who arrived in a frontier town in the Old West.

[5 : 51] It was a rural church. And he was very disturbed when early on in his ministry there, he was out walking by the river one day, and he saw some people hauling logs that were being floated downstream from the river up onto the river bank.

And on the end of these logs, they had the names of the logs owners branded on them. And he was horrified to see some of his church members cutting the names off the ends of the logs and then rebranding them.

So he thought, what am I going to do about this? He didn't want to just go right up to them and challenge them. So he decided to wait until the next Sunday, and he preached a sermon, Thou shalt not steal. Well, people were leaving the church afterwards, shaking his hand as they went out the door, and every single one of them, including those that he saw stealing these logs, just shook his hand and said, great sermon, pastor, thank you very much.

So he felt he needed to try it again. So the second week, he preached pretty much the same sermon, word for word, on Thou shalt not steal. Once again, he had the same polite response. Everybody walked past, shook his hand and said, thank you, great sermon. So he decided that he needed to ramp things up a bit and be a little bit more focused. On the third week, he preached exactly the same sermon once again on the message, Thou shalt not steal.

[7 : 17] And he repeated that phrase, Thou shalt not steal, virtually every other sentence, except for the very end, when he said, so then, my friends, Thou shalt not cut the ends off thy neighbour's logs.

And they drove him out of town. It was Mark Twain that famously said, when it comes to the Bible, when I read the Bible, it's not the bits that I don't understand that trouble me.

It's the bits I do understand that trouble me. See, when you hear the message of the Gospel, when it lands in your life, you can't not make a response.

What should we do then? What does this mean? And if the Gospel really is in God speaking to us, through Jesus, into our own lives, and God wants the best for us, then we shouldn't be surprised that he may want us to make changes.

He may be calling us to stop doing some things that may be very painful to stop doing, and he may be calling us to take up things that may be very difficult for us to take up.

[8 : 33] But it's a message we need to hear. Let me tell you a story. I feel a little bit embarrassed sharing this one with you, but I'm going to anyway.

I'm currently in the process of sorting out being a power of attorney for a close family member, and gradually working through the different parts of the process.

And this involved, a few weeks ago, having to go into a building society that I hadn't been in before, and I thought I'd got pretty much everything all sorted out, all paperwork, went armed with everything that I could think of, all the documents and everything.

So I went along and went into the building society, walked in, and there was some surprisingly unbusy, and there were several members of staff there, sat behind tables, looking very friendly, and said, come on over, come and sit down.

So I sat down. And they said, how can I help you? I said, well, this may be quite a long thing, but let me just share with you what I've done so far and what I need to do.

[9 : 43] So it's all to do with power of attorney. And they smiled and nodded. I said, well, the thing is, is I've got a close family member that wants me to be power of attorney, and so I've started doing things.

We signed all the solicitor stuff, and that all went through a very long time ago. I've got all of that with me right now. And I went into another branch when I was in another place a while ago because this person lives a long way away from here, and they can't get to the building society, so that's why they've asked me to do it.

And so what I was told, what we really want to do is to be able to set up some online banking for them so that I can actually just do everything for them.

They can phone me up, tell me what they want me to do, and then I can go online and do it for them. And so the thing is, is that they've also got one of those very old-fashioned accounts that's got the old passport, and they've recently had a letter.

Here's the copy of the letter here that actually says that they're discontinuing the use of these passports, so they're going to have to change their account in the next few months anyway.

[10:46] And I said, I wasn't sure what to do, so I went into another branch, not this one, a couple of weeks ago and started the process, and they told me that what I need to do is to actually set up an account myself, put one pound in it so that I can get online, and then they can attach this new account to my account, and then I can actually access it for them.

They said, yeah. So I've set it up, I've been home, and I've waited a week or whatever, and now I've gone online, and now I've got this new account that I've set up in my own name, and I can now do online banking, and so now I'm coming in today with everything that I think I need to be able to do the next stage.

I've got all the paperwork for their account, I've got my ID, I've got a passport, I've got a driver's license, I've got their passport for their account, I've got everything. Can you advise me what to do, please? And they said, do you need the building society?

I said, yeah. He said, this is an estate agent. The building society is next door. Now, in my defence, there was a lot of scaffolding outside, and all the signs were covered.

The second thing I would say in my defence is that the first thing that I saw when I walked into the room was the word mortgage. Yeah? But it was only at this point that I looked round and realised, actually, the place was very quiet, and there were lots of pictures of houses for sale in all directions.

[12:22] So, yes, I'll admit, I'm a total muppet. But after I got over myself, I apologised profusely, I went next door and sorted out what I had to sort out in the building society.

Now, where am I going with this story? This person that listened to me was lovely. You know, their listening skills were second to none. They gave me eye contact, they smiled, they were friendly, they let me say everything that I had to say while they nodded and listened really carefully.

And I apologised to them for wasting their time. But I couldn't help thinking, and it took me a long time for the penny to drop afterwards. Why on earth did they wait that long before telling me just to stop?

Stop. Is that not a value that everybody would surely subscribe to?

Why did you wait this long before telling me? If you were making a set of mistakes in your life, if you were messing something up, if you were completely on the wrong track, wouldn't a true friend be somebody who would actually have the courage to confront you lovingly, but in a way that is authentic and real, and say, because I love you, and because I think you're making, because I care for you and want the best outcome for your life, I'm having this tough, going to have this tough conversation with you and stop you right now.

[14:11] I'm pointing you in the direction that you need to be going. When we read the Christian gospel, and it lands, and it says things that at first sight may seem quite harsh and very difficult, don't write it off just because it's difficult.

It's difficult because God loves you. It's difficult because God knows that in order for the best things to happen for you, tough choices have to be made, including sacrifices, including laying down things that you don't want to lay down, and including taking up things that you have to take up.

Sometimes tough, difficult challenges come our way. We need to be stopped in our tracks and told we have to stop right there because it's in our interest and God loves us enough to tell us so.

I'm going to close by sharing with you an image. What should we do then? What should we do? What does that mean for each of us right now in our lives? What things might God be saying to us that we've got to stop? What things might God be saying to us that we've got to stop?

[15:44] You know, almost always, when we ask that question, what should we do then? It's not going to be an easy one, but it's going to be something we need to hear.

So I'm going to share with you an image. It's an image that, it's not a magic trick, by the way, so don't get your hopes up. Something's not going to suddenly disappear or appear or anything like that, but it's an image, a visual image, and sometimes I think visual images can speak more powerfully than words.

When we ask ourselves that question, what should we do? We need to remember that it's a question that we need to ask and keep on asking every day of our lives of following Jesus.

I've got a glass and I've got some water. I've got quite a lot of water here, actually. I'm going to start by pouring this water into the glass. This is just ordinary water.

Christchurch tap water. It's delicious. You can get some afterwards at the back. Actually, you can't because I've got all the chunks. Sorry, catering team. When you come to Jesus for the first time, you say, what shall I do then?

[16:55] You give your life to him. The Bible tells us that you become a new creation. You see that water there. It's clear. It's pure. It's amazing. You come to Christ for the first time and you know the reality of Jesus in your life for the first time.

You know he's real and it changes things. It changes the way you look at life. It's amazing. But you know, when that happens, it's still human, which means you won't completely have lost all the human stuff that you carried before giving your life to Jesus.

It's still there. So that question of what shall I do then needs to be an ongoing question where we ask God's Holy Spirit not just to fill us the once, but in an ongoing way.

Let me show you what I mean. You see, the chances are that there'll be all sorts of things, ordinary human things, but things that aren't perhaps that great that will still be going on in our lives.

I've got some lemon juice here. This is bitter. I'm going to pour that in and that's just to remind us that we might be carrying bitterness around inside us.

[18:11] Sunny gone, cloudy and bitter. I've got some white vinegar. Now the thing is, is that this represents self-righteousness.

You know, when you become a Christian, there's such a danger there. You can suddenly think, well, I'm all right now. The thing is, is that this looks like water. Self-righteousness, you kind of can't necessarily see or it's not always that clear.

And sometimes, I'm going to pour some of this in there, sometimes then, you know, self-righteousness is going on and it might just look like righteousness. It might just look like we've got, you know, wonderful, pure lives, but reality is it stinks.

You can't smell this right now, but I can. I've got something here that smells just as bad, but you can see and that's malt vinegar.

And this represents anger. Again, these aren't abnormal things, that's the point. They're ordinary things. But maybe we've got some anger still kind of going on in us.

[19:22] Pour that there, you can see that now. It's really not looking good and you seriously wouldn't want to drink that. Oh, I've got some green food colouring here.

Maybe it's envy. We might not even realise that we're envious, but, you know, we're, put some green in there. There we go.

That, that actually we're carrying around that envy in our lives. Looking at other people's lives and making comparisons with ourselves.

Or, maybe, I've got some blue here now. This stands for the really toxic stuff. The stuff that we're addicted to.

The stuff that feels like it's become so absorbed in us we can't get rid of it. The stuff that just doesn't seem to go away, but that just seems to skew the way we look at just about everyone and everything.

[20:30] So there we are. That's us. We're ready with that to go out and win people for Jesus.

Looks great, doesn't it? We ask that question. What can we do then? It's not just a one-off question. It is. We're still saved. We may know that despite all of that mess in our lives, God still, for some bizarre reason, loves us unconditionally.

But he doesn't want us to stay that way. And the thing is is that when we come to him, he comes and he pours his spirit into us.

It's not just a one-off. Because his promise is that he will go on pouring his spirit into us.

[21:35] And gradually, and this may take years, in fact, it never really stops. But his Holy Spirit just pours and pours and pours and pours and pours.

And the wonderful thing is, is whether we're there to receive it openly or not, he's got so much more spirit to give than we have human mess that needs clearing up. And in Ephesians 5, Paul uses this phrase, which is hard to translate into English, but he doesn't just say about being filled with the spirit, but he talks about keep on being being filled.

Be being filled. In other words, it's an ongoing, continuous thing. It's not something that just happened once and then that's it. But rather, his Holy Spirit wants to fill us and go on filling us each

and every day, which means no matter how much rubbish, no matter how much junk is going on there, the stuff that we can see and the stuff that we can't see, God's Holy Spirit never gives up on us and he wants to keep on soaking us in his spirit, filling us with his spirit, completely, completely filling our lives and flushing out all of that stuff so that every time we come back to him and we say we are sorry, it's not hypocrisy, it's facing up to the reality that we need his spirit every day of our lives because we're human beings and we've all got that mess, but God is real and God understands us and God knows us and loves us enough to keep on challenging us and telling us the stuff that we might not want to hear but we need to hear and as his spirit keeps filling us so we will stop doing gradually and sometimes subtly the things that we need to stop doing and he will also give us the courage and the strength and the power to do things that we really don't want to do but we can do because only he can give us that amazing Holy Spirit power because he is completely and utterly inexhaustible and so it goes on and never stops tastes alright what shall we do then?

well let's pray right now Lord thank you that even though we often perhaps feel like giving up on you you don't give up on us thank you that there's always more of you than there is of us and that no matter what mess there might be in our lives that needs to be stopped and no matter how many new opportunities there may be that actually you know could happen if only we trust in you thank you that your spirit is there to open up those possibilities so Lord as we ask that question now each of us will be answered probably in a slightly different way but Lord what would you have us do? Lord fill us and go on filling us with your Holy Spirit power wash us clean fill us with hope fill us with energy fill us with vision fill us with passion fill us with courage go on filling us and renewing us that we may become the people transformed that you long for us to be now tomorrow and every day in Jesus name we pray Amen Amen whaterm quant for it to end all the way of hearing and above them and above the end and above you worry well