

Evangelism

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

- [0 : 0 0] Paul stood in the meeting of the Arropocos and said, Men of Athens, I see in every way you are very religious. I guess that you've worked out now that we're talking about evangelism today, and I'll just explain a little bit about that word for a moment.
- But I want to just, forgive me if this kind of starts with a slightly depressing note, and don't check out, but just hang on in there.
- So recently, the statistics were published from the Church of England about the health of our churches. And what you need to know is that between 1983, which was the year that I first became a senior pastor of a church, in that year, 40.3% of the people of this country claimed some kind of allegiance to the Christian faith.
- In 2014, that 40.3% had reduced to 16%. In the first 10 years of the 21st century, that decline started to plateau a little bit.
- And unfortunately, it then has accelerated since 2010, although those statistics are slightly pulled out of shape because of COVID, and the fact that we couldn't attend worship services during that time.
- [1 : 4 9] On Friday, I had breakfast with somebody who works at the heart of the church's bureaucracy. And he said to me that nationally, the way the church is thinking is that during lockdown, 40% of our regular membership have not turned up in church again.
- But the one bright bit of news on the horizon is that 15% of people have arrived who are new people.
- It's not clear what that means entirely. It might mean that people have come from other churches and gone to another church to kind of give it a shot, so to speak. You don't have to look, and you don't have to have a PhD in statistics to see that actually the Church of England is declining.
- You remember at the beginning of the pandemic, we were all obsessed by something called the R number. Do you remember that? Someone say yes. And the R number was that figure that if it went below one, the disease was spreading in your region.
- But if it dropped below one, it was starting to rescind. Well, some bright spark, a professor of statistics, decided he'd work out the R number of the Church of England.
- [3 : 1 5] And you'll have guessed, the news is that it came out at just under 0.9. In other words, we are continuing to decline.
- I should say, and this should worry you, especially those of you who have been around churches for a long time, that in 2014, the percentage of people in the age range between 18 and 24, the percentage of people in that age range who claimed any affiliation with the local church was just 2%.
- In other words, at the moment, it doesn't look like there are many people kind of waiting to take the places of your seats when God decides to call you home to glory.

I'm not saying that to depress you, but it seems to me, and this is why I've always had a problem with the House of Bishops in the Church of England. It seems to me we can only talk about reality, because if we talk about anything else other than reality, we can never get a plan together to deal with that reality.

One of my massive frustrations as a bishop was that nobody really wanted to know that the church was declining. The data was in front of them, but they didn't want to know.

[4 : 42] I remember once in the Church Times, by the way, only get the Church Times if your blood pressure is running low and you want to raise it. It said on the front of the Church Times that the headline was, Peter Braley had just produced his church statistics for the last decade saying, Church in Decline.

Then the subheading was, Bishops Not Worried. And I wrote a letter to the Church Times and I said, so what will worry them?

I still don't have an answer to that question, as a matter of fact, 20 years as a bishop almost. So whatever evangelism is, despite Alpha, and thank God for Alpha, Christianity Explored and these process evangelism courses, which have definitely had some impact on a very small number of people nationally, more so internationally.

And if you want to be encouraged, know that the R figure for the global church, taking into account that most of the Western churches are in decline, the R figure for the global church is 1.3.

It's growing. But the one thing you could say is, in the Western Church, and the Church of England, I think, would be particularly in sharp focus, to conclude this introduction, is that whatever evangelism is, we're not very good at it.

[6 : 17] We don't spread it very well. And the net result is, we're all growing old together in church, which is a rewarding process to an extent.

But it's not the way that it's meant to be. The root word, the Hebrew word, of the word that is translated evangelism, is a word that means the announcement of good news, largely used in the context of good news in relation to battles.

It's about the announcement of victory. The Greek word that interprets the Hebrew word, before we get the English word evangelism, is a word that means the announcement of good news, the evangel, the euangelion in Greek.

The Church of England loves that oft-quoted, cliched phrase of Francis of Assisi.

Francis of Assisi said this. He said, Preach the gospel at all times. Someone say, Amen. And then he said, Use words if necessary.

[7 : 36] The Church of England loves that. Because it gets them off the hook of preaching the gospel. The gospel that changed my life, and if you're prepared to embrace it if you haven't already, will change your life dramatically for the good.

The reason why St. Francis is so wrong, I mean, we all know broadly what he was talking about, but he wasn't talking about evangelism. We all know what he meant, but in Romans 10, verses 14 and 15, Paul is speculating to this church in Rome as to how it is that people become Christians.

And what he says is, I don't have time to read this order, but the conclusion is, faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

And Paul goes through this thing saying, How will people hear if no one ever preaches it to them? No, says Paul. Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

You can preach the gospel without words. You can do as many good works as God calls you to be, but on their own, they will never ever lead people to Christ via the good news about Jesus.

[9 : 00] Incidentally, I slightly struggle with the book that we're using because I don't ultimately believe that evangelism is a spiritual discipline.

And I say that because evangelism is a gift given to people who have the gift of evangelism. The people whose gift is to help other people find Christ via the proclamation of the gospel.

So it can't be a spiritual discipline, but this is where you come in, folks. You may not all be called to be evangelists, although Michael Green always reckoned that there are more evangelists in church congregations than nobody ever knows.

Not even the people who might have that gift, incidentally. About 10% congregations have a gift of evangelism, says Michael Green.

But, and this is why you can't get off the hook, folks. All of us, if we're followers of Christ, are called to be witnesses.

[10 : 14] Acts chapter 1, end verse 8. You will be witnesses to the ends of the earth. What does a witness do?

A witness shares their experience of God. And of course, that makes an assumption. And the assumption is, you have some experience of God to talk about. Like I told you this before, but when I was in local church ministry, I was really keen to kind of see if I could persuade this congregation to take their part in evangelism by acting as witnesses the other six days of the week.

We started that with a little research amongst the congregation. We said to them, suppose somebody came to you and said, you know what, I've been reading about Christianity.

You know, you gave me that book and I've been reading about it. I really want to become a Christian. What should I do? Do you know what most members of my congregation would do at the beginning of this adventure?

They would say, go and see Mike. Not good enough. So I want to talk to you really about being witnesses and what that looks like.

[11 : 29] But let me tell you something that really doesn't help. The reasons for church decline are far too complicated and far too wide-ranging for me to have time to tell you them today.

You'll be very relieved to know. But there is a modern aspect of that which is very troubling. And that is, the church seems to have joined in with that thing in our culture where we're entering a kind of season of self-hatred.

Let me read that one commentator has written about this, specifically about the Church of England in a book that came out this year. Talking about the trend of self-hatred in our culture, not allowed to love our country anymore, don't talk about the Commonwealth, don't talk about the Empire.

The Church of England, writes Douglas Murray, has long led the way in this trend. For a generation, it has found itself in a position of having to apologise for spreading its gospel around the world and being embarrassed by its former missionary zeal.

In recent years, it has also decided to take upon itself the most hostile possible critique of itself. If you really don't believe in this thing, if you really think that everything to do with the church is something to be despised and we need a new game plan, this is not a message for you.

[12 : 56] So let me just offer you some thoughts as we go through. One of the things, we read that the risen Christ told us we're all witnesses.

The closing words of Matthew, and I know that people's final words on planet Earth are either very helpful or very not. Remember what Jesus said before he parted company with his disciples.

You, sorry, go and make disciples of all nations. Go. We're obsessed with getting people to come to church.

Jesus says, no, go. Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. Peter, writing in 1 Peter 3 in verse 15, says, be prepared to give a reason for the hope that's in you.

And what would you say? Somebody came to you and said, I'd love to become a Christian. What should I do? I know what you say. Go and see Mike. Go and see Clive.

[14 : 11] Go and see Ross. Go and see Susie. But being a witness means you have to take some responsibility. And as an evangelist myself, I can tell you that my job, our job, is made so much easier when you do your job.

It's an awesome responsibility to be a witness for Christ. Do you get that? That some people will make up their minds about Jesus Christ on the basis of what they see in your life when you're not in church.

That's an awesome responsibility in my view. So we come to Acts chapter 17. This, incidentally, is a very interesting chapter, in case it's escaped you, because it is the only recorded sermon we have in the New Testament where Paul was preaching to Gentiles, to non-Jews.

we didn't read this verse, but in verse 16, verse 10, sorry, I beg your pardon, sorry, verse 16, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Look, our church, the church of England, the church in the West, needs to become more distressed distressed about the state of our life and our culture as a nation.

[15 : 47] If you look at the world as it is, and you're very comfortable with the direction it's taking, it's not a message for you. I can't compel you to be distressed, but I can plead with you to be distressed for the way the world is.

Paul tells us that in verse 16. He also tells us, or implies in these verses, that Athens was a culture like ours in this sense.

It was gospel-averse. Athens was a great center of something that really is impressive.

It was a center, the philosophical center of the world. Amazing. Amazing thinkers, Aristotle and Plato, people who 300 years before Christ have had a major impact and have a major impact today, for instance, on how we think about political governance.

Great minds, but it was gospel-averse. There is no philosophy, particularly those mentioned here, Stoicism, philosophies like that, that would have any time for the idea that God became a man.

[17 : 16] They didn't have much problem believing that their gods might have become monsters who arrived out of the sea, but they couldn't believe that God would ever become a man. It was culture-averse.

Paul was seen as a threat. But here's some thoughts. Paul had a plan for evangelism. If you look in Acts from about chapter 12 through to chapter 17, you will see Paul's plan for evangelism was consistent.

Start in the synagogue, open the Old Testament, preach to warm contacts people who at least believed in God, and try and show them that Jesus was the Messiah.

When he got kicked out of the synagogue, he went out in the marketplace and started to preach, and that's what we're reading about in Acts 17. Paul didn't stand up by rubbishing their culture, by shouting at them.

No, he started by engaging with that culture. I don't know about you, but I never get the impression that St. Paul could have had a kind of alternative profession and been a stand-up comic.

[18 : 34] My impression of him is he's a little intense. He's the kind of person who quietly drives me mental, but that's another story. And Paul engaged in their culture.

Remember, he said, look, I've been walking around your city, and I see there are thousands of altars dedicated to idols. He said, and then I found an altar which wasn't designated to any idol, so I want to talk to you about the God who is unnamed.

He started to preach a sermon to them, and this really irritates very conservative evangelicals. He preached to these philosophers, and he never mentioned the cross.

He had a plan to preach the gospel to Gentiles that started with creation. ended with judgment and a call to repentance.

So, let me give you something to take home with you today. Let me tell you what the nature of a witness is, what you're meant to be like. First thing is, you're supposed to be filled with faith in the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 53] That's a precursor of your life the other six days of the week, and the seventh day of the week. Witnesses share their experience of God.

Secondly, their priority is to live their lives as God calls them to live it. Thirdly, you are meant to be able to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

Fourthly, they didn't let their fear mess them up. They rose above their fear. And fifthly, and this is a problem for some Christians.

Try and avoid being weird. But always be honest. People are not that interested in your minor triumphs in life.

They are far more interested when you've had something go wrong in your life and somehow your life is still hung together. So, some practical things for you.

[21 : 04] One is, I want to invite you today, if you've never taken this witness thing seriously, start now. Start now.

Start to think about that as you leave this church this morning. Secondly, start by praying. Pray about the people you know, and please God, you do know some people who are not Christians, and pray for them.

Pray that you will become a meaning maker in their lives. Thirdly, get exercised in your faith by exercising menial and undramatic acts of love.

See, I told you at the beginning that you're supposed to bring cake to church next week. That means we can feed our faces, but how many of you will think about baking a cake for an unbeliever this week, and taking it round, and just giving it over to them.

It says in our culture that the act of writing a letter is gone now. We're all emails, aren't we? Well, I suppose an email can convey God's love.

[22 : 32] I personally like to handwrite a note myself. That's probably you're thinking, he's just told us not to be weird. Drop a note to somebody, an unbeliever, especially if you know any unbelievers who are going through a very hard time in life.

You could pick up a phone and call somebody who's an unbeliever. Try and encourage them, try and say something. It says, seriously, anybody in this church this morning who couldn't do that, incidentally, if you're a lousy baker, don't bake anybody else a cake.

Is there anybody here who couldn't do that? And who knows? That might trigger a conversation that becomes life-changing.

how many of you invite people to come to church with you on a Sunday? I've been meeting with a bunch of guys for four and a half years nearly now, every day in the weekday, and none of them are Christian, and they give me a hard time in some ways.

I'm not worried about that. But in that four and a half years, I've constantly invited them to come to church. I thought it'd be a big attraction to say to them, come Sunday, I'm preaching. Yeah, that worked well.

[24 : 11] Except on Easter Sunday this year, one of them turned up at St. John's Clevedon. I saw him through the smoke. I'm just, you know, I'm claiming that before God as a minor, minor, minor triumph, but maybe it's a start.

Suddenly, we can talk more openly about the gospel. I mean, most of these guys, like a lot of people, like some of you, got lives that are total train wrecks.

God knows you need his help to help you get through. So, menial and undramatic acts of love are things that any of us could do.

maybe that's what St. Francis meant. Fourthly, commit to learning an outline of the gospel.

There are plenty of them around. You just need to have a plan what to do. Paul had a plan. Why can't we have a plan? Why doesn't the Church of England have a plan?

[25 : 23] plan to re-evangelize this nation. Become invitational. Listen to me.

You know, I know this is the way you think. If you asked a friend to come to church and they rejected your invitation, you're scared that that might mean the end of your relationship forever.

Here's my question. If somebody ditches a friendship with you on the basis that you once invited them to church, what kind of friendship was it in the first place? Stick your neck out for Jesus, for crying out loud.

I think I'll write a chorus called that. And finally, finally, I started out by being really depressing, giving you the news.

You know, there's only one statistic in the whole of the Church of England that's vaguely positive. And it's this, that apparently children's work in cathedrals has increased by 4%.

[26 : 31] Throw your hats in the air. And that's certainly true of Bristol Cathedral, and that's partly because quite a lot of overseas people, who came to the cathedral thought it was a Catholic cathedral.

And we were not quick to disavow them of that. But I want to end by saying there is a great, great opportunity here.

Every day, you pick up your newspaper, you turn on the television, we're in for hard times, guys. Some of you are going to be in for hard times.

I don't know what your financial situation is, but I imagine if it's anything less than stable, you're a little concerned about what you're going to have to pay to switch your heating on and to eat and to do the things that we've enjoyed probably in a way that we've taken for granted for a long time.

But it's not just going to happen to people in the church. It's going to happen in this community. And one of the things that the church has always brought to the table, I don't mean your kitchen table, I mean speaking figuratively, is the church has always been an institution which is added to social capital.

[28 : 01] That is community, networks. And if ever there was a time needed for the church to stand up and build social capital in our culture, not instead of the gospel, but alongside the gospel, surely to God, this is it.

This is it. Started out by saying if you're going to take your calling as a witness seriously, you need to start to pray.

Years ago, when I was a curate, you could say all the gear and no idea. And I had this idea, I read it in a book about charismatic renewal.

It's a good thing to walk around the area of your church and pray for people. And I read that and never did it. I was walking along one day, I suddenly thought, oh, I could pray.

So I prayed, Lord, send me somebody who I can witness to. And literally, I'm not kidding, suddenly this woman fell on the floor in front of me.

[29 : 16] I mean, I know it's my normal impact, but fell on the floor in front of me. And she was a disabled person and she tripped over the step between her drive and the pavement.

I helped her up, took her into her house and she offered me a cup of coffee. And three months later, she was baptized in the church.

Health warning. Don't pray for opportunities to witness unless you're prepared to act on it. So listen, friends, I think this is a great challenge.

And I think you could do this, but all it needs is your willingness. And I'm not going to stand up or put your hands up if you're prepared to take this on.

I'm going to assume that you are committed Christians. I'm going to assume that you may not have been doing this for a whole bunch of reasons.

[30 : 19] Fear, can't be bothered, whatever. But I want to ask you today to think about this as you leave this church and decide what you're going to do about it starting today.

Paul, in a very adverse gospel culture, preached his funny little sermon and we're told a few people came to Christ, including a man called Dionysius, who was an influential person in that city.

The revolution had started there. And it can start in Cleveland. And it's not just down to me. It's down to us.

Let's pray. I'm just going to leave a moment of silence. And I'm going to pray that during that silence, God's holy fire will come upon us.

... ... Lord, your word tells us that the gates of hell will not prevail against your church.

[31 : 48] But Lord, you didn't particularly have the Church of England in mind when you said that. And neither did you have the church in Western Europe.

With all its material advantage, with all its buildings and plant, and Lord, we confess to you, we're sick of sitting on a disaster.

And Lord, I don't know whether the guy who invented the R figure is right or wrong, but I do know the evidence is abundant. And unless together we do something about it, we shall just continue to fail slowly.

So Lord, I pray for these dear people gathered here today. Lord, would you visit them with the Holy Spirit and provoke them to do something as an act of witness this week.

And I pray these things in Jesus' name and the people who agreed said together, Amen. Amen. Amen.