

Promiscuously Inclusive: everyone is welcome

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[0 : 0 0] the Tigers football ground. I'm 16 years old, spotty and holding a banner. And next to me, the man says, you know, Jesus wants to change the world more than you do. And I turn to look at him and he's wearing a dog collar. So I immediately hate him. And we fall into a conversation and I'm hooked. Jesus wants to change the world more than I do. And I'm going to bring down apartheid single-handedly. Jesus must be really powerful. So I joined his little group.

And we talked and we talked and we talked and we talked. And I've not stopped talking since. The conversation goes on. He's now the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner.

The church was born in conversation. The word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood and talked and chewed the fat and brought us information, shared good news and told us which way was up and told us how we might get in touch with the God who had sent him and whom he embodied. The word became flesh. The word, a conversation that had been going on from before eternity, became flesh and became our neighbor. Carried on talking. And so not surprisingly, when we read the Gospels, we find Jesus engaging in conversation with all sorts of people.

We have the story of Levi, read to us by Tim. What does the word made flesh say? Well, actually, if you read Luke 5 and 6, not a lot. He only answers questions. So people say to him, why are you eating with those sorts of people? They're not very nice people. Why are you eating with them?

Come. Which, of course, the subtext of that was, why aren't you eating with us? Because we're nice people. And Jesus says, well, because I've come for people like these. I've come for the low life.

[1 : 5 8] I've come for the tax collectors. I've come for those people that the righteous write off. I've come to talk to them. And then they say to Jesus, why don't you fast? Why don't your disciples fast like our disciples fast? Because we're good and holy people. And Jesus says, because I've come to start a party. You can't fast at a party. And then he says, I've come to bring new wine. And you can't put new wine into the old wine skins that are clearly not up to the task. But he said, the trouble is, most of you like the old wine because that you've got used to. And you don't like new topics of conversation being brought into the mix. And then a little later on in Luke's gospel, he has a meal with Zach, a tax collector, a notorious figure in those parts. And he was hiding up in a sycamore tree. And Jesus called him down and went to his house. And they had dinner. Now, we don't know what they talked about. But I suspect it had quite a lot to do with money, quite a lot to do with Zach's attitude to the poor, quite a lot to do with how Zach was making a living. Because when they emerge from dinner, Zach says, I'm giving half my possessions to the poor. I'm paying back everybody that I've ripped off. And Jesus says, well, today salvation's come. How many of you have given half your possessions to the poor? And how many of you have paid back everybody you've ripped off through your business?

Because that's the kind of conversation that Jesus enters into with us. That's the kind of conversation he wants to have. So in John chapter 4, we find him on his way back up from Judea to Galilee. And he has to go through Samaria, which Jewish people tried to avoid if they could. But Jesus just went through because there's all sorts of people that he could have a conversation with.

And he goes to the well and there's a woman. And he asks the woman for water, which was an unusual thing to do because he's Jewish and she's a Samaritan and they don't talk to each other. He wanted to talk because that's what Jesus did. And so the woman gave him some water and then the woman wanted to talk about where it's appropriate to worship. And Jesus said, fine, I'll have that conversation. Let's have a conversation about where it's appropriate to worship. And then in the course of the conversation, Jesus said to the woman, you've been married lots of times and the man you're with at the moment, you're not married to. And we immediately tune into the conversation by thinking, ah, Jesus has called out a sinner here. He's spotted the sinner and he's talking to her. But actually, the word sin and the word repentance doesn't appear in this story at all. This is just information.

This is just who the woman was. And Jesus wants to say to her, the fact that you are this person doesn't exclude you from the conversation. We often want to put barriers up to the conversation that we have with people because they're not like us. They do things that we disapprove of. But Jesus wants to say to this woman who probably was the victim of low life expectancy and the manipulation of women by men in that culture, that you're welcome to have the conversation that I'm having with all sorts of people. And when they've had the conversation, she goes off and gets people from the village and they believe her testimony because they thought she was a reliable woman. I wonder how many others really think the Samaritan woman's a reliable woman, somebody whose testimony you would take seriously. The trouble is we form judgments about people before we have the conversation with them.

Jesus didn't do that. Jesus just entered into the conversation and saw where it went and allowed it to go wherever it went. And the people who followed Jesus were like him. So we fast forward to Paul in Athens. You can read the story in Acts 17. We didn't read it earlier, but you can read the story in Acts 17.

[5 : 58] Paul's in Athens. He's on his own because his team are doing various things around that part of the world. And he's on his own. He's wandering around the city and he sees the city is full of idols.

And he gets a bit exercised by this. He doesn't like this. So he goes and finds some Jewish people that he can talk to. And they probably all agree with him that this is not a great thing to be in the midst of all these idols. And then he goes and talks to people in the marketplace who are bouncing ideas around and discussing the meaning of life and all that kind of stuff. And eventually he gets hoiked out of the marketplace and invited to come and present his teaching to the Areopagus.

Now the Areopagus was the council that determined whether a new philosopher in town was allowed to bring his new teaching. They were the kind of thought police of Athens. And so Paul is invited to present what he wants to say. So what does Paul do? Well, he commends the Athenians for being religious.

He doesn't talk about their idolatry as something bad. He talks about it as being a sign that they are really interested in finding out what life's about. He said, you're so religious and you're so questing in your spirituality that you've even got an altar to an unknown God. Now they got altars to all sorts of gods, but just in case they'd missed one out, they had an altar to an unknown one.

And Paul, in his conversation with the Areopagus people, wants to bring that God into focus. And so he brings that God into focus, not by quoting scripture, because that wouldn't have meant anything to them, but by quoting their own poets who they understood. And by talking about the fact that God had chosen to judge the world, to call people to account, through a man that he has raised from the dead. That man is not named in Paul's sermon. Interesting, isn't it? The conversation that Paul has with these people. I wonder if it's the kind of conversation that we would choose to have, or whether we would think that we've got to get all the facts about Jesus out in the first sentence, in order that people know where they're coming from. Paul didn't do that. Jesus didn't do that.

[8 : 26] They both said things that were intriguing and interesting, and drew people in to a conversation where they could bounce ideas off each other, and where they weren't closing it down by forcing people to make a decision. The Jesus movement in the first century was born in conversation. A movement centered in workshops in the cities around the empire, where people talked. You sadly, you'd benched and you made something. You were a carpenter. You were a potter. You were a tent maker, like Paul was. And naturally, you talked to each other while you were doing it. You talked to customers.

You talked to people who came into the room. You talked to all sorts of people who were interested in having conversations with you. And those conversations spilled out of the workshops and into the neighborhoods and into mealtimes. The Jesus movement was born in conversation.

It was all promiscuously inclusive. Interesting title that Tim came up with. And it reminds me of the conversation that I fell into with that young curate outside Leicester Tigers rugby ground. I wouldn't be a Jesus follower today had I not fallen into that conversation with him, because I wouldn't have darkened the doors of a church as a savvy 16-year-old. Good grief, why would you go to church?

What on earth is there in church that would interest a 16-year-old who wants to change the world? The curate knew, God knew, and the conversation led me into a life of adventure with Jesus.

And so writing to the Colossians, Paul offers some advice on how we might engage in conversation with people. So here's Colossians 4 verses 2-6 from the message translations. It's slightly different, but I'm going to pick some words out of the NIV. You'll be pleased to hear. Paul says, Pray diligently, stay alert with your eyes wide open in gratitude. And don't forget to pray for us, that God will open doors for telling the mystery of Christ, even while I'm locked up in this jail.

[10 : 40] Pray that every time I open my mouth, I'll be able to make Christ plain as day to them. Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Don't miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity.

Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation. Not put them down. Not cut them out. So what does Paul say about how we engage in conversation with those who are not part of our Christian community? The first thing he says is that there is an open door.

Paul. We live in a world of opportunity for constructive encounters with people. This is not about whether they come to us or we go to them. It's about what happens when we meet with them.

For Paul, the open door was literally two-way. He spent most of his days sitting in a workshop making tents because that's the only way he made a living. If he didn't make a tent and sell it, he wouldn't have money to pay the rent to put food on the table and clothes on his back. So Paul was a working man who made a living by making tents. It's quite a quiet occupation making tents. It's just the sound of the rustle of canvas or leather, depending on what he was using, and the sound of the needle going through the material. So it wasn't a noisy space. And lots of people would come in to have conversations because that's what people did at their workbenches. And so Paul would spend an awful lot of time talking to people about all sorts of stuff. Probably talking about the price of canvas, the difficulty of getting the right pointy needles. But he'd also be talking about what life was about and how Jesus had turned his world upside down.

And all sorts of stuff like that as well. And he'd be interested to know what other people thought about life, the world, and everything. So the door was literally two-way. People came in, and he of course went out and went and had dinner with other people down the street and other places. But the door was open also metaphorically, not just literally. It was open because people want to have a conversation.

[13 : 05] It's been said that we live in the most spiritually hungry age that we've ever known. People are hungering for something because all the answers that they have been given don't seem to work.

We are the most discontented society that we have been for ages. We feel that the world does not work in the way that it should. Now if you can't find a conversation in all of that with the people that you work with or live near, then you really need to go and see a doctor and check your pulse.

There are so many opportunities, so many open doors for us to have conversations with people. And conversations are always two-way things. They're always about us saying something and them saying something and us listening as well as speaking. So the door is open metaphorically, and the early Jesus followers walked through that door and talked and talked and talked.

Have you ever wondered why Paul wrote to churches? And when he wrote to churches, he had to spend so much time correcting what had gone wrong in those churches. Take Timothy, one Timothy as an example. He left Timothy in Ephesus because Timothy had to sort out the leadership of the churches because it wasn't really naff. It was leading people up the garden path. And Timothy had to very gently help the hosts who hosted the gatherings of the Jesus followers, not necessarily to think they knew which way was up, but to learn stuff. Why was that even a situation? Why weren't people already all sorted and perfect when they came into the church and became leaders of it? Because the church was promiscuously inclusive. It just drew people in. And then it said, ah, we need to sort people out now we've drawn them in. So Paul spends 16 chapters of 1 Corinthians trying to sort out these Corinthian

Jesus followers and separating them from other Corinthians. Because of course they'd all been Corinthians much longer than they'd been Jesus followers. And so they had a lot of things to unlearn. But people didn't unlearn it before they came into the church. They came into the church in order that they might unlearn it. Because the church was a place of promiscuous inclusivity.

[15 : 36] Everybody's welcome to join the conversation about Jesus. And we can sort out the details as we get to know each other. And our New Testaments are full of letters of Paul and others sorting out the details precisely because the church was a place of welcome and inclusion of all. So secondly, Paul talks about wanting to talk about the mystery of Christ. Fascinating phrase, talking about the mystery of Christ. The Christian faith is a relationship rather than a formula. Not a set of doctrines to be accepted before the conversation can begin. But it's actually the embracing and being sucked into a mystery. Remember how Paul started his Christian journey? He was on his way to Damascus to arrest people who were followers of Jesus. And he got knocked over by a bright light and a voice from heaven. And what did Paul say to the voice? Who are you, Lord? And how did Paul spend the rest of his life? He spent the rest of his life trying to grasp the answer to that question. So he tells the

Philippians in chapter 3 that he has not yet got this, but he presses on for the high goal of knowing who Jesus is. That's where his whole life was spent. And so that's why he talks about the mystery of Christ. He's talking about the fact that somehow he has been embraced by the creator of the universe who has revealed himself in Jesus and filled him with his Holy Spirit. And he's trying to get his head around what that means. His whole life is about that. And his whole conversation is about sharing something of that experience with other people. People who are looking for something similar, some kind of spiritual experience that is going to make the world make sense to them. So he is wanting to talk about the mystery of Christ. And this is why he says that we should pray diligently and be alert.

Because this is about seizing opportunity that comes our way. This is about being alert to the fact that people's conversation could lead us into helping them to discover something about Jesus.

When we're at work, when we're out and about, we will be alive to the opportunities that God scatters across our paths. That will only happen if we are alert, if our eyes are open to what God is already doing in our neighbors. Grasping opportunities requires a bit of wisdom, as Paul says in verse 5.

That is, knowing what it is that makes people tick. Knowing their interests, their concerns, their anxieties, and the like. This doesn't usually come by way of revelation. We aren't sitting in a darkened room, and suddenly God drops into our minds the truth about Lucy, who works in our office and we've been talking to her. We talk to her. We ask what kind of weekend she had. We ask whether she has sugar in her tea, because we've made her a cup of tea. We get to know her. And in getting to know her, we get to know a little bit about what makes her tick. And we begin to see opportunities for us to share what we have discovered about life. And so Paul says we engage in conversation. Verse 6 of Colossians 4.

[19 : 47] Stress here is on dialogue. Conversation is always about giving and taking. It's always about speaking and listening. When Paul talks of telling the mystery, it's in the context of having a dialogue with people. Sometimes answering questions, often asking questions like Jesus did. And so he says our talk should be gracious. We should be people who speak graciously to others. We're not pushy. We're not trying to win an argument all the time. What Paul has learned from Jesus is that offering an intriguing question sometimes draws people into exploring what the Christian faith is about much more than shouting a doctrine at them. And conversation, says Paul, should be salty. Let your conversation be seasoned with salt. Sometimes we can be incredibly dull and boring. What did you do at the weekend? I was in church. Oh, right. Okay. Now what did you do? We sang songs and listened to a bloke go on and on and on.

One of the most riveting things to tell your friends and neighbors and workmates on a Monday morning. So maybe you did something else over the weekend that you also enjoyed. It's not that you don't enjoy church. You don't want to talk about church. But sometimes you want to find common ground with people before you launch into the church conversation. Our conversation should be salty. So let's be funny and provocative and unexpected and unpredictable because salt gives zing and flavor to food. That's one of the things that salt does. And let's build up rather than tear down. Let's help people feel that they matter to us and to God because salt preserves. Salt does good things in society. That's why Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth. So let's be gracious and salty in our conversation.

Let's also be well informed. How many of you can explain what Jesus means to you without lapsing into kind of church phrases that nobody beyond this building really understands? Let's be well informed.

How do we make sense of our faith and put it in a language that other people will understand? But let's also be well informed about other people. That's not the same as being judgmental.

That's just about knowing what it is makes people tick. The gospel, the good news about Jesus, has always been promiscuously inclusive. It's always gone out and included people it shouldn't. That's what Jesus was doing with Levi and Zacchaeus, with the woman at the well, with all sorts of other people that he encountered. He drew them into the conversation, into the movement. Come and explore what life's about with me and my band of brothers and sisters. It's always been like that. But I wonder how many people in Hearn Hill this morning actually know that's what the church is like. That's what the gospel is about.

[22 : 54] Whether they think gospel just creates a whole load of standoffish people who don't get involved in the local community, who don't share their life with their neighbors in any meaningful way. If we've experienced God and we've experienced the renewing of His Spirit, it is because God has been promiscuously inclusive of us. He has lavished His grace upon us, as Paul says in one of his letters. And people should notice that in the way we speak. People should notice that in the interest that we take in other people in order that they might have the same encounter with the living God that we have had. So are we promiscuously inclusive people or are we just a bit staid and religious? Amen.