

Life Assurance: Sharing The Good News - Sunday 16th October 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Morning, everyone. Good to see you today. And if you don't know me, my name's Matt. I'm the vicar here at St. John's. Although, in an effort to be all-inclusive this morning, I've been practicing some Cantonese, okay?

So bear with me on this. But I'm going to try this. So, daiga ho no hi mat. Hey, thumbs up. All right. Come on. Ho go hin yin sik nae de.

Oh. Neigam yat ho zing sam. No, okay. That was underwhelming with that.

Yaomo mantai. Hey, there we go. There you go. Google Translate when you get home for that one. All right. I hope that was more or less correct, not too offensive, because I know the inflection can make a difference with Cantonese.

But I want to talk this morning, that's our way into talking about communication today. And in particular, how we might communicate well with how we might share the good news of God's love with those we live alongside.

[1 : 04] So if you've been with us in recent weeks or you've caught up online at all, we've been doing a Sunday series of late called Life Assurance, which has involved exploring the ways that we might know God's assurance, as we've just been singing, through the ups and downs of life.

But as well as being assurance for us on a sort of personal level, it's also, I think, about us being able to bring or offer that same assurance to others.

And so I guess a question for us today might be this. How might we assure others of God's love for them?

Or in other words, how might we best share this good news with our friends and our neighbours?

Now, I'm fully aware that when we talk about sharing the good news of Jesus, we might say sharing the gospel with people.

It can almost immediately make us feel pretty uneasy and under pressure, perhaps. I mean, it's associated with the word evangelism, which, while it's a great word in its own right and simply means sharing the good news, it can conjure up images of maybe well-intentioned but often sadly pretty cheesy people who try and shoehorn Jesus into conversations as their way of trying to convert people, perhaps.

[2 : 33] And it never normally goes down too well. By way of illustration of perhaps how not to do it, here's a sketch from the classic comedy series The Far Show, in which two Christian policemen attempt to do some evangelism at work.

Oh, excuse me. Can you help me? I've just come from the park. Someone just came up and took off with my dog. Right, yes. Hold on a minute, madam. George, there's a lady here who says she's looking for eternal salvation in the Lord.

Don't talk to me, sir. I didn't say that. I said someone came up and took off with my dog. Right, scratch that, George. She's changed her mind. Don't be saying, madam. Right, what's its name? It's a she. She is called Jess. Jess. Right, so that's J-E-S-U-S. No, she's called Jess and you've just written Jesus.

So I have. Still, it's a lovely word, isn't it? Jesus. Jesus. He died for all our sins, you know, my dad.

[3 : 40] Oh, right, sorry, madam. So you say you were in the park when you lost little Jesse. Right. Would that be the park by the church, madam? No, the one by the lake.

Yeah, but you can see the church of Our Lady from there, though, can't you, madam? Can you? In that case, madam, would you have been able to hear the faithful singing from there? Something like this. Kumbaya, my lord, kumbaya.

Kumbaya. Would you have been able to hear anything like that, madam? Um, I suppose so. Hmm. And if you had heard it, how loudly would they have been singing? Would it have been sort of... Kumbaya, my lord, kumbaya.

Or more sort of... Oh, my lord, kumbaya. Hmm? All right. Well, um, look, if they had been singing from where I was, it would have been about as loud as, um...

Kumbaya, my lord, kumbaya. Kumbaya. Kumbaya. Kumbaya. Kumbaya. Kumbaya, my lord, kumbaya.

[4 : 44] Oh, lord, kumbaya. Come on, boy, for the lord, Les. Confident. Hallelujah. Now, madam, this fellow that took your dog, can you give us a description, please?

Um, yes. He was quite tall and had sort of, um, long, straggly hair. Oh, and a sort of a beard. What's that, George?

It does sound a little bit like Jesus, doesn't it? Look, are you two going to do anything to help me? Yes. Yes. And don't say, yes, we're going to pray. Ah.

No, it's all right. Um, now, did this man who... Oh, my goodness. I've just been overwhelmed with the love of our lord. LAUGHTER Lovely when that happens, isn't it?

LAUGHTER Look, I don't wish to appear cynical, but somebody has stolen my dog, and I want to know if you're going to do anything about it. Uh, well, actually, madam, there's something here.

[5 : 45] Apparently, we arrested someone earlier today who answers the description you just gave us. Oh, well, that's marvellous news. Yeah. And even better news, we forgave him and let him go.

LAUGHTER LAUGHTER That is funny.

It's funny, that's good. I like that sketch a lot. But it's also, perhaps, in places a little bit close to the bone, perhaps, because it reveals, I think, what perhaps many people in our culture might think of when they imagine people attempting to share the good news of Jesus with them.

You know, as we saw, if you're not careful, it can feel very contrived, probably counterproductive often to the very message that we might be trying to share. And so how, in our times, how in our town, might we have or might we share the assurance of God's love in ways that might actually connect with people?

Well, to help out thinking on this this morning, we're going to look at a little Bible passage from Luke's Gospel, chapter 5, in which Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him.

It's in English, and we've got Cantonese subtitles. So see what you make of this. One day, as Jesus was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.

[7 : 05] He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore.

Then he sat down and told the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.

Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them.

And they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord.

[8 : 12] I am a sinful man. For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken. And so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid. From now on, you will fish for people. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything, and followed him.

Now, it's a story from a time in Jesus' life when he was just beginning to gather his disciples by calling them to follow him.

A number of these first followers of Jesus, those we saw, were fishermen, guys like Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, blokes who made their living by fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

And yet, far from being strangers, it's likely, it seems, that Jesus knew these guys already. You see, although Jesus himself grew up in Nazareth, down the bottom left of that map there, the adult Jesus, we know, had settled in a place called Capernaum, which is up on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, fishing town on the edge of the shore there.

[9 : 34] But we also know from the Gospels that Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were from the town of Bethsaida, which is just a couple of miles along the coast from Capernaum.

And since we're not talking big towns here, maybe two, three hundred people in each, figures, I think, that these fishermen knew Jesus as they'd probably seen him around, around the lake. Maybe they already counted him as a friend. Indeed, that friendship seems to be there because we're told that when he's teaching on the seashore with crowds gathering around him, Jesus decides to get into one of the boats when owned by Simon Peter in order to, seems to give himself more space to be heard.

There's a familiarity. You don't just take someone's boat, it seems, if you don't know who they are. Jesus doesn't ask. He just gets into the boat, suggesting there's already this closeness between Jesus and Simon Peter.

And I think that's a good first principle for us, maybe, in terms of how we might share something of our faith and the assurance we have in God's goodness to us.

[10 : 44] So yes, there may be times when chatting about faith stuff happens with strangers, with people we don't know. But it seems to me maybe nine times out of ten, I'd say the best context for sharing with others about the difference that God's love makes in our lives is in genuine, ongoing friendship.

I mean, I'm assuming that since you're here this morning, there's at least some kind of openness, some kind of willingness perhaps, to consider things of faith, things of God.

But I also imagine that for most of us, that faith, at whatever level we're at, it's been nurtured or prompted by a friend or a family member telling us about church or about God and the difference that their faith makes to them.

Yes, there may be exceptions among us. A stranger might have meant you've come here this morning. But for the most part, it will be friends or family who have introduced us to the idea, at least, of God's goodness and love.

And that's important, I think, because I'd say, well, the good news for us and the most natural way to share it is in the context of friendship.

[12 : 06] You see, if our friendships are genuine, where we talk about what makes each other tick, what matters to us, our struggles, our joys, and so on, and we talk about our spirituality perhaps, how we connect, how we understand God, or sooner or later in our conversations, it's going to come out as part of our natural, normal talk.

It's going to be not shoehorned in like it was in that sketch. It's just going to flow out of our everyday conversation with our friends. But it's worth saying as well, I think, that it's the friendship is the foundation on which our faith can be shared and not the other way around.

What do I mean by that? Well, I think it's simple. I think there's a principle here. We don't make friends with people simply because we want them to know Jesus. That doesn't make someone a friend.

That makes them a project. Now, even Jesus, it seems, it seems he knew Simon, Peter, Andrew, James, and John as friends first, and it was in that setting that questions of faith and the life assurance that God brings could emerge.

I'd suggest we do well to follow that example. Friendship first and then the faith stuff will naturally follow. What else?

[13 : 31] Well, if we go back to the story, we're told that after he'd finished speaking from his boat, Jesus then says to Simon Peter, put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

and then Simon Peter's reply, again, indicates a familiarity between them because he says this, he says, master, interesting expression, so there's a respect here it seems as well as friendship.

He says, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything, but because you say so, because I know you perhaps, because we're friends, I will let down the nets for a catch.

And as we saw, Jesus seemingly performs a miracle because all of a sudden their nets become full of fish, full we're told to burst in.

It's a miracle which understandably freaks these fishermen and friends of Jesus out a bit. And yet, on the back of this miraculous catch of fish, Jesus then says to Simon Peter, don't be freaked out, don't be afraid.

[14 : 34] From now on, you will catch people. You will catch people. I wonder what you think of that as an expression. How's that catching metaphor make you feel that we as followers of Jesus are

called to catch people?

I think for me, if I'm honest, it makes me feel a little bit uneasy, really. I'm not exactly struck, I don't think, with the idea of us trapping people like in a net.

I don't think that's a helpful idea. It feels wrong. It feels like hunting. It feels predatory almost. And yet, is that what Jesus meant? Is that what he's talking about when he says we're going to catch people?

Well, I don't think so. Because the relief is that when we see how Jesus himself goes about sharing his good news with people, we don't see him trying to trap or snare people at all.

In fact, the only people we see trying to trap anyone else in the Gospels are those who oppose Jesus. So they're often described as asking Jesus certain questions in order to trap him.

[15:46] So entrapment, catching people in that sense, I don't think that's what Jesus kind of meant. Rather, if we look at the person of Jesus, what he models time and again is this principle of living a life, of sharing stories, of demonstrating compassion in such a way that it draws people to him.

Jesus is compelling. More often than not, people seek Jesus out rather than the other way around. He doesn't need, it seems, to go hunting for them.

No, because as a result of his life, his light, his love, people are drawn to him. He has that sort of magnetic quality.

And that, I would suggest, is perhaps the model of engagement which Jesus has in mind for Simon Peter and also for us to follow. That as God helps us by his spirit to model and demonstrate the love of Jesus in practice, so there's something so compelling in that way of life that it will draw people to God through us.

Now, what kind of life, what kind of love might be particularly compelling to others? Well, I think what often draws me to people, what I admire most, is if I see in them a sense of authenticity and honest humility.

[17:18] For example, I was lucky enough on Friday night just gone to get a free ticket to see James Taylor in concert in Birmingham. If you know his music, you'll know he's one of the greatest singer-songwriters of all time, sold 100 million records, I think, and while he's now well into his 70s, he's still got it and it was a cracking concert, it really was.

And yet, what was lovely on that night was that despite being so talented and having these millions of record sales and awards and so on, when he spoke in between the songs, he was so humble and so self-deprecating.

He was also pretty honest as well. If you know anything of his story, he was speaking of his past struggles with heroin and alcohol addiction, admitting that, well, you guys in the audience, you can go to the bar, no problem, but I have to stay sober now because otherwise I can't handle it.

Now, the gig was at Resorts World, you know, the old NEC in Birmingham. It's a big arena venue, thousands of people there. And yet, unusually, for an artist in an arena show, at the end, he simply came to the front of the stage and patiently signed as many autographs as people wanted.

You know, I was in proper fanboy mode, I guess, at this point. So, I made my way to the front.

That's him at the edge of the stage, just crouching down and signing anything that people would give to him. I got his autograph as well.

[18:47] Obviously, you have to do these kind of things. But people next to me were saying, you know, they were declaring their love for him. They were saying, I named my son after you, James, and we got married to this song and that kind of thing. And it was all, you know, very nice, very nice atmosphere together.

But what struck me was the way that people flocked to the front to see him, the way people, if you like, were drawn to be in his presence because, yes, of his talent and his music and it had been a good concert, but also, I'd suggest, people were drawn to him because he came across as someone who had this word, who had authenticity.

He was approachable, he was honest, he was humble. And in fact, those qualities make me want to listen to his music even more. And so, if we applied this sort of authenticity quality to ourselves, you know, being approachable and honest and humble in the way we live out and talk about our faith in particular, my experience tells me that other people will then be drawn through us to the God whose spirit is behind each of those winsome, compelling qualities.

And the good news is that if we just make a rule in life to be honest and humble, it means we don't have to worry if we haven't got all the answers or can't make sense of everything connected with our faith because that's not actually what people are drawn to.

Rather, as was demonstrated in that James Taylor concert, I'd say they're drawn to us living life in a way which acknowledges its complexity, that is honest about our struggles, but which also celebrates our joys.

[20 : 33] And with God's help, we can all do that. We can all be honest and authentic. We can all grow in becoming more approachable, more humble. And that, I would say, that is good news.

That is evangelism. Because in that way, we can all share the assurance of God's love with others in ways which will enable God to draw them to himself.

We share assurance of the good news of Jesus through friendship, yeah, through authenticity. One last thought for today is that we also share the good news of God's love through generosity.

Now, what might that look like? Well, again, another little story from this week. This week, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday morning, I've been taking assemblies for years seven, eight, and nine at Chase Terrace Academy, our big local high school.

Now, getting up in front of 250-odd teenagers at a time, it's not my idea of a good morning, I tell you. It's not an easy start to the day. Adrenaline at half past eight is not my friend.

[21 : 44] And especially with my daughter, Heidi, she's in year seven at Chase Terrace, and she was absolutely petrified that dad's going to come in and embarrass her. So, it was a fine tightrope to walk on that one.

Bit of a tricky setting overall. And yet, what's also worth knowing is that I've been here 11 years now as Curit and Vicar, and this week was the first time I've been invited into the school to speak or to share anything.

So, it got me thinking, what prompted this invite after so long? Well, I don't know if you remember, but back in the early part of last year, early 2021, we got involved with this Laptops for Schools initiative where kids needed devices for home learning during lockdown.

And through your generosity, through the generosity of our community, we were able to donate around 100 laptops and tablets to our local schools to distribute, including a load of devices, and we had some funds come in, so we gave £1,000 in cash to Chase Terrace Academy as well.

Now, at the same time, though, as that laptop initiative, in chatting to the teachers at Chase Terrace, I found out they were also running their own in-house food bank for local families in need.

[23 : 00] And so, because, again, if you recall, early last year, we as a church, and Burnt would be a friend, we were receiving a huge amount of free food from Morrisons to distribute to those in need.

They were so generous, Morrisons. And so, I was able, on our behalf, to take boxes of food on various occasions to Chase Terrace Academy as our contribution to their in-house food bank.

And so, at the time, I remember I swapped numbers with the teacher who was in charge of that.

Fast forward, so I'm 18 months then from that point, and she rang me up a couple of weeks ago saying, hi Matt, could you come and talk about a traditional harvest festival, please, in three assemblies, because we've got to cover it as part of our year's program.

And my heart sank, to be honest, because A, I don't like being invited to assemblies because they freak me out and they're scary, but it's also this idea of talking about a traditional harvest festival. It sounded very boring to me, very boring indeed.

So I said, no, no, I'm not going to come and speak about plowing the fields and scattering and all that. However, I will happily, I said through gritted teeth, come and talk about food and the cost of living and how we might help those in need.

[24 : 14] And the teacher was fine with that. So this week, I ended up doing some sort of interactive cost of living assemblies with free food prizes for each group, but finished by saying that they could give to their school food bank or indeed receive from it if they or their families were in need.

And despite my nerves and my daughter's justifiable weariness, they seem to go okay because free food's always a winner, it seems, with teenagers. Now, why am I sharing this little story?

Well, two reasons, really. Firstly, it seems to me the only reason I was invited in to speak to 750 kids this week in Chase Terrace Academy was because we as a church, you and I, had previously demonstrated a generous commitment to them as a school and to our community.

I know, I know that a school puts a lot of trust in outsiders who they allow to come in and speak. So it's both humbling and encouraging, I think, that through what we do, they were keen this time to hear, 18 months later, what we might have to say.

And in my experience, that's how sharing God's good news works. Our actions speak louder than our words. And indeed, it's often only through our actions that we earn not the right, but the invitation to speak.

[25 : 44] But that in itself is good news because whilst we may not all have the gift of the gab and be able to put answers to things, we have all got the gift of being able to serve and to share, to give and be generous.

That's what we're going to be celebrating about Sue's life tomorrow, her willingness to serve and be generous with her time, her energy, her care. And as we've seen with Sue, as we've seen amongst each other, that practical help is an essential way, I'd say, in which God uses each of us to share the good news of his love.

To share the assurance of God's provision. So that's the first way I'd say in which living generously enables us to share the good news. But the second reason I'm mentioning these assemblies is that having been invited in for the first time, whilst I did say from the front that I was the vicar from St. John's, hardly told me not to mention my surname, so I wasn't associated with me, but I said, I'm Matt from St. John's and I said that part of my job, part of our job as a church is helping people who are in need and who might be struggling, I intentionally, deliberately didn't mention God once. Now you might say, call yourself a vicar, what are you playing at? What are you playing at? What a waste of an opportunity, you might think. And I guess in some ways you could be right on that, I could have got it wrong.

But whilst I'm anything but ashamed of Jesus, and I hope you know that from over the years, my gut feeling this week was that since this was the first time that many of these kids had ever met me, I wanted to start not with where I'm at with faith, but with where they're at.

[27 : 36] And I guess my hope was that in meeting these young people where they're at, on terms they could hopefully understand about the everyday cost of living and the need for generosity. But my hope is that that might foster a longer term relationship with this school where in time I can maybe share in words as well as in actions why we and I do what we do.

So even if I'm never invited back, I've encouraged them to live generously for the time being and that'll do for me perhaps. But my hope and my prayer is that in time we might be able to help them join up the dots to the God who is behind that generosity, the God who we trust will be drawing them to himself.

And so I put all this together alongside the opportunities I have and the collective opportunities that we have as a church. I appreciate for each of us that we'll all have different opportunities as individuals to live generously in the way God allows, in the way we can serve others, generous perhaps with our time, our attention, generous perhaps with our opinions and how we speak of each other, generous perhaps with our money.

And so I wonder for you this week, what ways do you think God might be putting before you as a way to be the good news even before talking about it?

Could be in home life, could be at work, when you're in social settings, could be when you're in a supermarket queue or wherever. Have a think as you go through this week with God about what that generous living might look like for you this week.

[29 : 19] And then if we tap that generosity onto those other two ideas that we consider. So there's this idea as we said of friendships, friendships in which we're able to share the good news of Jesus.

And if so, have a think, which friendships could you offer to God this week as ones in which there might be opportunities for the conversation to turn, to share something about God's love?

Who comes to mind? Who's sort of open perhaps to having that kind of conversation? And then there's this idea about us being authentic and honest and approachable and humble so that God can use us to draw people to himself through the way we are.

And again, I wonder as we go through this week, which aspects of your life, what situations are you facing where your honesty about your joys or your struggles might just enable God to give reassurance to someone else through you?

So, three things maybe to keep hold of as we share the good news. The importance of friendship, the importance of authenticity, the importance of generosity. Three ways through which the good news of Jesus and the assurance of God's love can be shared.

[30 : 45] And my hope, I guess, is that we might pray this week for different opportunities in our own way to be the bringers of God's good news this week. Amen.

Amen.