

Service Transcript
28th August 2022

Welcome , Notices, Birthday Box

Prayer

Opening Words

There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. ... God sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Romans 8:1-3 (part) NLT

1158 All my days

478 Reign in me

JAILBREAK!

Last week we had the story of Peter being sprung from prison miraculously after being arrested by Herod who planned to give him a show trial and have him executed. Prison breaks are popular theme in film and literature , particularly if it involves someone falsely imprisoned or there is some heroism in it. So for example, in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, the story is about a man who is innocent of the crime he is imprisoned for, who escapes by digging a tunnel slowly and undetected over a couple of decades. Or there's the story of THE WOODEN HORSE, of British prisoners making a bold escape from a POW camp, which was based on a true story.

The theme of amazing, even miraculous escapes from captivity are a found in several places in the Bible. I mentioned the imprisonment of PAUL AND SILAS last week. Remarkable escapes from captivity are a recurring theme in the history of the church too. You can read of these stories and testimonies in books and online. CORRIE TEN BOOM I think of Corrie Ten Boom who was released from certain death at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp as a result of an unexplained clerical error that allowed her release.

One story personally related to me was a Congolese Pastor, who with others, protested in Kinshasa the capital of then Zaire against the injustice of the Government. He was rounded up and thrown in prison. CONGO PRISONS are bad places, with much violence and starvation. Whilst he was there one of his guards realised that Jaime had been at school with him and knew he was a Pastor. He said "you are a good man, what are you doing here?" Jaime explained. Later that night, the guard appeared and said "come with me." He was lead by the guard to a room where he told Jaime to change into a spare uniform. He led him out of the prison saying "follow me, leave the talking to me, and salute when I do." He then led him out of the prison, saluting as they went. Jaime then made the short trip across the Congo River to Brazzaville where he contacted Zairian dissidents and was given asylum in the UK. When the government of Zaire was overthrown, he was invited to become an adviser to the new government of the DR Congo and returned. God is good.

Back to Paul and Silas. How they boldly sang songs and praised God at midnight. Then there was an earthquake and all the doors spontaneously opened and the prisoners' chains fell off. Of course the JAILER arrived and believing all is charges had escaped planned to fall on his sword, until Paul stopped him as none of the prisoners had escaped. The guy uttered the famous words

“WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?” Was he talking about his sins, or the fact that he had a wrecked prison and whole load of released prisoners? It doesn't matter as Paul used the opportunity to bring Good News to him by leading him to Christ.

Which nicely introduces our theme of RELEVANCE for today, as Paul used the opportunity to tell the man about Jesus and for him to find faith as a result of witnessing these extraordinary events.

One way we can see our bringing the gospel to people, is that Jesus frees people from captivity. It may be literal, but He releases any who would trust and follow Him from the captivity of sin and death because of His finished work on the cross. Let's sing about that now.

1702 Amazing Grace (My chains are gone)

Int. Prayer

THE BROWNS

Give thanks for BMS workers Paul and Sarah Brown, now commencing work with the Thai Karen Baptist Convention (TKBC). Paul has his visa but pray that Sarah's will go through too.

Pray for Paul as he trains to teach English: for confidence, God's strength, and wisdom that he will complete the course well.

Pray that they will settle well into their new roles and that their relationship with TKBC leadership and Karen communities will grow.

OUR NATION & WORLD

O God our heavenly Father, who promises to hear the prayers of your servants and to help us in our need. We thank you for our country and our world and for all those who have given of themselves to help others and who seek to promote peace.

We pray that men and women of peace in Russia and Ukraine may prevail in the current conflict and that a just and lasting peace may be sought. We pray your help and comfort for refugees from Ukraine throughout Europe, including here in the UK.

We pray also for just and compassionate government in our own land where people are suffering the consequences of rising prices and increasing unrest. Father, in these turbulent times, may we as your people trust you, and may men and women turn to you as they ponder the meaning of life and the pressure it brings them.

Father, open our eyes to the wrongdoing around us.

Deepen our concern for the poor and homeless.

We pray for a better nation in which men and women strive not only to gain their rights but even more to fulfil their responsibilities.

Give us a deep desire to live as your servants, called to be faithful, to love you and each other and to live in peace.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

THE CHURCH

Reading: Romans 10:9-15

9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

726 Give me a heart of compassion

Sermon

ROMANS 1:16

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Last week we considered this verse and I focussed on the statement that the gospel is *the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes*. If the gospel is that powerful, how comes we see so few coming to Christ right here right now. I pondered on words from Henry Drummond an 19th century evangelist who said: *Either the Gospel cannot save them, or the Gospel does not reach them*. As God's people we take scripture at its word that it is the power of God that brings salvation – don't we? So Drummond's second assertion is the one we need to look at.

STATEMENT ABOUT GOSPEL NOT REACHING THEM

So, how does the gospel we communicate fail to reach people? I suggested last week it is because we have little expectation of the power of the Gospel OR we are not presenting it in a way that is relevant to them. I dealt with expectation last week, so today we look at relevance.

TITLE

Is the "gospel" **we** present to our community, our friends, our workmates, our society really good news, or is it just a load of BLAH BLAH BLAH that's not relevant to them?

I was brought up at a time when the majority of people had been "churched" in some way, even if it was being sent to Sunday School, or attending services at key days in the year. Few had never attended church. This means that the majority understood, at least in part, the language and culture of church. They had some clue about words like sin, gospel, cross, salvation, believe, trust, resurrection, miracle, disciple, Son of God and so forth.

We now live in a post-Christian, post-Church society, where a significant number have no background in the Christian faith or connection with church. In our increasingly secular land, we will find a plethora of views about the meaning of life, of spirituality and most have a limited view of what Christianity is about (which may be very negative). Adding to that, there is now a pluralism of not just religion, race and culture, but a pluralism of gender and sexuality too. The decline of Christianity means that fewer have personal engagement with Christians so that views of what Christians believe can be shaped by individual prejudices, reinforced by the media, particularly social media, and ignorance. So when we come to present the gospel, the good news,

it's almost impossible to stereotype people (which perhaps isn't desirable anyway) and there is no good "one size fits all" for how we present good news to them.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL

So how do we communicate the gospel to them? I think we need to make a distinction between two things. THE UNCHANGING TRUTH First of all that the actual message of the gospel as presented in scripture is the unchanging truth of God. So as we read in Romans 10

9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

At its very heart, our message is the simplest one on earth. Here's the Romans version of it. I'm not going to unpack it today. Following Jesus involves heartfelt belief and an act of faith. Yes, I know that it is just the tip of a wonderful iceberg that we discover as we get to know God and learn of Him from His word.

The biggest mistake is when the good news is presented as the "gospel plus". Paul was writing at a time when some Jews were teaching that salvation came through the gospel plus taking on the requirements of Judaism and that was the Law. Today this can involve gospel plus church, gospel plus a set of lifestyle changes first, gospel plus believing in certain values or doing religious "things".

Salvation is through an act of faith pure and simple. That's the message of Romans 10. It doesn't matter how bad anyone is, each can find salvation through the same simple act of faith. But what if their morality and lifestyle is all wrong? If that simple faith is real, then the Holy Spirit will quickly challenge each person with what that means personally for them. And of course, we have that role as church in disciplining those who come to Christ through faith.

WE NEED BE INTERPRETERS OF UNCHANGING TRUTH

The message may be simple but for reasons I mentioned earlier, it may come out like gobbledygook and blahblahblah to someone who has no background in church. In our reflection and discussion section on the website this week, I'm going to give you some passages from where the apostles spoke to others of Christ, but adapted and interpreted the message in a way that they would be understood.

So look at some of the early passages in Acts we see Peter preaching to Jews and he uses a lot of words and the Old Testament that they would understand and respond to.

Go then to Acts 18 which is Paul's speech on Mars Hill and you'll find not one word of the Bible and no Judeo/Christian word. What you will find is Paul using their literature and traditions to present Jesus to them.

CARTOON – Paul knew that the gulf was so great between what he wanted to say and what they believed, so he found a relevance point where there was common ground that would peek their interest. QUR'AN BURNING A good contemporary example of this is in talking to Muslims. You'll get nowhere questioning the validity of the Qur'an or doubting their prophet – that's an insult to

them. We are called to be a redemptive people and bring them to salvation, not drive them away. A good way is talk about Isa (Jesus) and suggest they read His words first-hand. They respect Him even if its a different way to how we do, but it's a piece of relevant common ground.

We live in a world where we need to think of how we interpret the unchanging truth of God to our generation in a way that will connect with others. We do that against a background of social change has resulted in different values to what pertained say, 50 years ago issues like the role of women in society, LGBTQ issues, changing attitudes to race, attitudes towards migration, pluralism, a multi-ethnic society, and climate change. These are all things that have been exercising the church in recent years. How do we respond to them? Some Christians embrace change easier than others. We know there are churches comfortable with issues like women in ministry, with gender and sexuality issues, or gay marriage, or pro-life and other churches that stand against some or all of them. And looking on is a bemused society thinking – what?

Our task, our God given command is to reach those that don't know Christ and we need to examine ourselves. Is what we are doing, Christlike and within the will of God? What does scripture say? Most importantly how does this affect the way we communicate the gospel?

I'll leave those as questions for you but if we are to engage others with the gospel, we are going to need to be clear in our own minds what we are about.

The only thing I would say is that in reaching people for Christ, we need to keep the main thing the main thing – that is that we focus on how God loves them, desires them, offers the gift of forgiveness and life and take care not to go down streets we are not equipped to travel down.

WE MEET OTHERS WHERE THEY'RE AT

Actually, you'll find that for most people we meet who need Christ, we'll not find ourselves getting into philosophical or moral discussion, instead, our area of relevance is in more regular issues of life...

CARTOON

... with their needs whether that's health, emotional, financial, family, loneliness or whatever. So for the Philippian jailer his felt need was to be rescued from the terror of what would happen if his prisoners had escaped. Paul dealt with that one, and ministered to his real need of true salvation being in Jesus Christ. The lame beggar at the Temple in Acts 3 needed money, but instead got his real need for healing through Peter and John.

One of the biggest ways in to ministering to others has always been to minister to felt needs. Jesus did it, the apostles did it. We do it. It is the most common way we serve others as Christians. And that's great, because we already do it, as individuals and as a church. I know of many people who came to Christ just because some Christian befriended them at a time when they were in crisis. But there is one thing I would encourage you to do which Jesus and His apostles did and that is

SPEAK IT OUT

It's one thing to help someone out, but it's another to share your faith with them. It's clear from scripture that is what the intent of Jesus, Peter, Paul and the others was. It was one thing to minister to felt needs, but it is a failure of our calling not to speak about Jesus.

People appreciate friendship, those in our community are grateful we help them n various ways, but we must join the dots. There are some great church initiated ministries in our community and

throughout the land: but are they bringing people to Christ? It's something that's not difficult to quantify. If they are not, then we need to ask why not? The answer is usually because we are sowing and then not reaping. There are some fantastic ministries out there that bear little fruit. Why? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 10:14-15.

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

How can anyone know about Jesus unless someone tells them. You may say to me "but I can't preach". I would say to you that no-one likes being preached at. "Preach" is as much a figure of speech here as it could be a call to actually preach. Put simple, no-one will ever understand the Good News unless someone explains it and for that we need to use our voices.

Let me give you the simplest way of adding Jesus into your conversation or ministries. They tell you their problem and you say "can I pray for you." Preferably you pray then and there with them. Prayers of faith make a difference! It's a simple act that changes lives! Most people are happy for you to do it even if they have little expectation themselves.

It is one of the most powerful ways we can engage spiritually with those on our "frontlines", to use that term again. If you want the gospel to be relevant to someone and for yourself to be relevant to them, then pray for them and with them. Why? I come to my last point today.

REMEMBER THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In all the complexity of contemporary attitudes to life, faith and spirituality, one of the biggest game changers for people in understanding that the gospel is real is witnessing the power of God in action. After all as we said at the beginning that *the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*. For those coming to Christ as adults one of the biggest reasons for people to turn to Christ is that He intervenes in their life. That can be in many ways as we know from scripture: witness to miracles, experiencing answered prayer, encountering the right person at the right time, helping others, standing up for the weak and those suffering injustice.

The common denominator for all these is the Holy Spirit who acts in such a way as their lives are changed. Never think we act alone. Lives are changed because the Holy Spirit works in power. We reach out to others in His power.

The call of the risen Lord to go and make disciples is applicable to us today as it ever has been. It is a command to all of us. We bring Good News. God commends us in this in these words "*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!*" As the dark clouds of the pandemic go and we are faced with a raft of new challenges, let's reach out to our frontlines, to our community, to our families, workmates friends and whoever else and be relevant to their situations, their felt needs and introduce them to Jesus who can change their lives as He changes ours too.

Prayer

Let's close by singing this blessing to one another

980 Praise God from whom all blessings flow

For Reflection & Discussion

You may wish to devote more than one session to this if you are doing it as a group.

1. Think of the most ineffective and awful presentation of the gospel that you have heard. What was so wrong about it? How could it have been made more relevant to those who it was presented to?

2. Take a look of the following passages from Acts and try to answer the following:

How did the the apostle/preacher adapt the gospel to the people being addressed?

What part of the gospel message was most emphasised? Are there any commonalities? Why?

What role did the Holy Spirit play?

If you are studying as a group, you may like to divide into twos or smaller groups.

Acts 2:14-41 - Day of Pentecost

Acts 3:11-26 - Healing of the lame beggar

Acts 9:1-18 - The conversion of Saul

Acts 10 - Peter & Cornelius

Acts 13:4-12 - Paul on Cyprus

Acts 17:16-34 – Paul in Athens

Acts 22:1-21 – Paul in Jerusalem

Acts 24:1-22 – Paul before Felix

Acts 26 – Paul before King Agrippa

Acts 28:1-10 – Paul on Malta

3. Mark made the following statement in his sermon: *We live in a world where we need to think of how we interpret the unchanging truth of God to our generation in a way that will connect with others. We do that against a background of social change has resulted in different values to what pertained say, 50 years ago regarding issues like the role of women in society, LGBTQ issues, changing attitudes to race, attitudes towards migration, pluralism, a multi-ethnic society, and climate change.*

How much have these impacted on your life and the life of your local church? What things in popular culture do you struggle with? How can we address these issues and still remain faithful to the gospel?

4. How important do you think when communicating the gospel to others that we should keep the main thing the main thing – that is that we focus on how God loves them, desires them, offers the gift of forgiveness and life?