

Evangelism - sharing the faith

A sermon given on Sunday 1st May 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst
by Rev John Castle

Readings **Acts 16:6-15**, John 14:23-29

Lectionary Year C, The Sixth Sunday of Easter
(NB the lectionary reading from Acts starts at 16:9)

Introduction: what do these three scenarios have in common?

1. A member of St Michael's Church invites her neighbour to come with her to a Service at the Church.
2. A parent whose baby has recently been baptised attends a Start course.
3. An office worker is asked by a colleague why he goes to church and explains why it is important to him.

The answer is that they are all examples of evangelism. Evangelism is sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. It can be done in all sorts of different ways. It's about helping people who are interested in finding God for themselves to learn about the Christian faith. Or you could put it another way – introducing someone to your best friend. It's not about bashing people over the head with a Bible, or bullying people into going to church, or making out that you are holier than others. It's actually more like being the person who gives directions that enables someone else to find their way back to God. What you say might simply help another person to take one step in the right direction, but you will have made a significant difference in them coming to know God for themselves.

Liz Percival has written an excellent article on p3 of this month's newsletter (see <http://www.stmichaels-sandhurst.org.uk/newsletters.html>) about the Archbishops' call to every member of the church of England to spend the week before Pentecost praying for people to come to know Jesus Christ for themselves. I would ask you to read it, and if you are able, visit the website www.thykingdom.co.uk and also listen to Archbishop Justin at www.churchofengland.org.uk.

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Evangelism is at the heart of the mission of the Church. Jesus told his apostles to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:20). In today's reading from Acts we heard about how God called Paul and Silas to new areas of mission.

In Paul's first missionary journey, shared with Barnabas, he had visited Cyprus and parts of the interior of what we now call the region of Cappadocia in Turkey. They had founded churches in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, before returning to their home church in Syria. Now Paul, with a new companion, Silas, returns to those new churches to strengthen and encourage them, and then wants to move on to share the gospel in new areas.

It is at this point that the apostles seem to run into one obstacle after another.

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. (Acts 16:6-8 NIV)

The writer doesn't explain exactly what he meant by saying that the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching in the province of Asia, or prevented them from entering Bithynia. One way or another God was shutting doors, and Paul was sensitive enough to God's guidance to realise that he had to go somewhere else.

not only through the speaker but in the heart of the person who is listening. When we pray for others to come to faith, we need to pray that the Lord will open their hearts to the good news of Christ. Then we can speak and share and invite and watch God at work.

And so the Philippian church begins. On the face of it, it's just a handful of women, perhaps not the most influential members of the society at the time. But twenty years later, Paul, now in prison in Rome, writes his letter to the Philippians, a church that by now has elders and deacons, and whom he thanks for their generous gift of money, and reminds them of how, after he had left Philippi, the Christians there had been the only church to support him financially (Philippians 4:10-18). They might have started off small, but they had big hearts and expressed their support for Paul's mission not only by words and prayers, but by giving. He describes them as "my brothers and sisters whom I long for, my joy and crown" (Philippians 4:1).

One of the joys of my work is to see people come to faith and grow in it. I wonder who were the people who shared their faith with you? Did they have the joy of seeing you find God for yourself and grow in faith? What about those we know, and care about, members of our family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours? Are there any of them who we would like to see come to a living faith in Jesus Christ? If you are not already praying for them, why not start today? Remember that it is God who works in people's hearts to bring them to faith. But perhaps there might be a practical part that you could play too, by sharing with them something of your own faith in God, your own experience of his presence, his peace, his guidance, or by inviting them to explore faith for themselves, or just to come with you to church one time?

Let me finish with a prayer for the sharing of the gospel:

*Gracious God,
we thank you that you have brought us to know and recognise you
through our Lord Jesus Christ.
We thank you for those who shared the Gospel of Jesus with us.
We ask that in turn we may pass the Good News on to others.
Give us confidence to speak of you,
sensitivity to walk with others on their journey,
and love to inspire us to reach out to others.
Most of all, give us a passion to see your Kingdom come,
that we might take risky steps
to be your witnesses to your world.
Through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*