

“Do We Really Need The Gospel?”

(Matthew 4. 12-25)

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Christmas as a Listener

Back in 2010, I took LSL and we went on a long holiday to New Zealand – my first Christmas ‘off-duty’ in 20 years. We went to Midnight Mass at St Faith’s, Rotorua, an Anglican church serving a local Maori community, and loved the whole experience – especially the three of us cuddled together in the pews. *(So this is how it is for a normal family!)* And it was very different for me – to experience the Christmas Gospel as a *listener* not a *proclaimer*... to *hear* the good news of Christ’s birth.

I really liked the priest... His sermon was energetic and passionate. The main theme was this... ‘*As people and a planet, we have a great need for this story of Christ’s birth... a desperate need for the gospel of Jesus Christ... because we are people who urgently need good news.*’

Well it’s what you expect to hear in a sermon isn’t it? There’s nothing controversial there. But because I was a priest sitting in the pews for the first time in 20 years, I couldn’t help wondering... *How many people here tonight actually feel a desperate need for the gospel?* I know it’s the right thing for a priest to say... but did I *really feel* that urgent need?

I can ask the same question this morning? *Are we sitting here in desperate need of the good news of Jesus Christ? Are our tongues hanging-out in the hope of God’s Word breaking through?*

Jesus Proclaims

In today’s gospel, Jesus begins his ministry proclaiming, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* (17) In paraphrase... *The time is here. Turn your lives around. For God is so very close to you and the door to the new life of the Kingdom is wide open.*

Crowds flock to him. Well *they* would wouldn't they... for *they were* people in great and obvious need; they *were* people sitting in deep darkness – poverty, oppression, starvation, violence, depression – people desperate for light.

Our lives, however, are so very different. For we have everything and more – undreamed-of affluence, freedom, opportunity, longevity. We've got everything...¹ We don't need anything... do we?.

The Gospel in Affluent Times

The Christian gospel always struggles in comfortable times... because people see no need for it. For all the many words written about church decline, *this* is the most powerful factor behind the drop in allegiance to Christianity in western society – people simply feel no need for what the faith is offering.

Consumerism apparently provides the complete recipe for a happy life. It may well be that on any given day we feel unfulfilled... or tired... or even depressed... but if we try a bit harder... or if we get a bit luckier... or if only things would just break our way, then happiness will come. Apparently the recipe is fine – we just need to get the mix, the balance right... just a bit more... just a minor alteration or two... and the good life will flow. Any thought that we might turn *away* from *this* fabulous life to embrace something very different... is madness.

Of course we church-attenders are *somewhat* different... *Something* is attracting us... or we wouldn't be here. But let me repeat the earlier question... Are we sitting here this morning feeling as if we're in desperate need of God? Are our tongues hanging out in the hope of God's Light breaking-in?

Churches like ours are not about '*desperate need*' anymore. Most of the sermons I've preached in my life assume that the hearers are doing OK... and so the 'word' that is proclaimed is not expecting anything dramatic. Rather it offers... moral improvement to already-good lives; encouragement to

¹ As long as you overlook the disturbing levels of depression, violence, abuse, social dysfunction and inequality etc...

consider new ideas and adopt additional good habits... a tweaking of the balance of what already is...and solace and hope when things are really tough.

Now this may be perfectly reasonable and sane. But... if Jesus Christ stood before us this morning,² he *wouldn't say 'Look you're doing fine... and I've just got a couple of interesting and helpful things for you to think about'...* No... he'd say exactly what he said when he preached to those first desperate crowds in Galilee... *'The time is here. You can't keep living like this! Turn your lives around. For God is so very close to you and the door to the new life of the Kingdom is wide open. Grab the opportunity while you can!'* Christ would assume we are in desperate need. He'd see our consumerist lives as a tragedy! And he'd know exactly what to say about that. *'All you need do is turn our lives around... and start walking in a very different direction. My gospel is the light to show our way.'* That's how Christ would see it.

Need

But what can be done if we just simply don't feel the need?

Without a recognition of personal need, there is no fertile ground for the gospel... it can't find a foothold. Protestant evangelists speak about this openly and believe it's *their* task to 'convince people of their need'.³ But I doubt if a preacher can actually do this... You either recognise it or you don't.

This week I reflected on the question I asked myself back in Rotorua that Christmas. *Do I really have a desperate need for the gospel of Jesus Christ?*

It was easy to look back over my 61 years and recognise how critical Christ's light has been to me. How along the way I've so often been lost and confused, and how Christ's teaching has consistently and powerfully called me in a life-giving direction. *Looking back* it's obvious to see just how desperately I've needed the gospel.

² And by the way we say that sacramentally that this is exactly what happens here in the Eucharist. Christ is present and does speak directly to us in the Gospel.

³ To 'convict people of their sin'.

But now... surely after all these years... all that I've learned... surely I'm well established and less needy now. Well, I'd like that to be so, and sometimes I pretend it is, but the challenging truth is... that if I'm honest, I feel my need more keenly than ever. Every new step, every inch of learning and growth, seems to make me more aware of the baggage I'm carrying... the deeper issues waiting to be healed... just how far I have to travel... And the confusion I feel in my 60's is just as acute as it was 40 years ago. There are many mornings when I hang onto the gospel of Christ like a drowning man to a raft.

And at 61 there is a new dimension... I am appropriately aware of my mortality. Death is coming... hopefully not anytime soon, but I'm well and truly 'over half way' ... probably three-quarters done. I'm aware how critical Christ's light will be to me when I reach *that* dark place... when I walk *that* journey on which no-one but God can accompany me. I have a *new* need at this time of life – to become so attuned and connected to the light of Christ, that it will shine and guide when me when all else passes, and total darkness descends.

If I went back to that priest in Rotorua, I would say, *'Yes, you're right. I need the good news of Christ urgently... desperately... I'll never find my way without it.'*

Conclusion

What's it like for you? How's it going in your life? Is there need? If not, then this has been yet another irrelevant and possibly embarrassing sermon. But if there is... sadness... confusion... pain... emptiness... then *here* is good news. Christ stands before us and says with complete confidence and authority... *'Light has dawned. God's right on top of you and the doorway into the kingdom of 'new life' is wide open. All you need do is turn around and walk in a different direction. And I am the way... I can show you how. Listen to me. Follow my light.'*