

Today I want to talk about the big 'E' word in Christianity - Evangelism. Evangelism literally means the telling of the good news – the sharing of the gospel with those who do not yet believe. The word evangelism comes from the ancient Greek word euangelion, which means 'good news' or 'gospel'. Evangelism is the speaking of good news. In Jesus' day the word had strong political overtones. Whenever the Roman Emperor wanted to disseminate some propaganda across the empire, he would send messengers to every major town and city where they would stand in the town square and begin a speech with the words 'The Euangelion – the good news – the gospel – according to Caesar!' Jesus, then the early church defiantly declared a very different euangelion or gospel – the Good News of the kingdom of God.

When we talk about evangelism certain stereotypes spring to mind – televangelists, street preachers, crusades and so on. Some of us may have personally experienced evangelism negatively where we have been badgered with Bible verses or hassled in some other way. In our pluralistic world where all faiths are seen to be equal or equally irrelevant, depending on your point of view, evangelism seems to be an old fashioned throwback to another time and place – offensive even. You have your truth, I have my truth and we should just learn to get along without ramming our truth down other's throats.

Despite what we might think, or the media might portray about evangelism, there is no doubt that the early church grew rapidly as the Holy Spirit lit a fire of evangelistic fervor in Christian men and women. They shared about Jesus wherever they went – in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and in the end, to the far reaches of their world. They told the young and old, the rich and poor, the slave and free, the Jew and Gentile, the black and white and brown. And many of those they told responded with their lives.

Last week we heard of one such evangelist – Phillip – who as he preached the gospel in Samaria found himself in the middle of a full-blown revival. Villages, towns and cities were coming to faith and people were being healed and delivered from demons. This was an example of evangelism to the masses – to the crowds. This week through Phillip we hear a very different model or style of evangelism. Rather than mass evangelism we now discover very personal, 'one on one' evangelism.

I want to quickly tell the story and then reflect on the amazing challenge and inspiration it provides us – all of us – to be sharers of the best news anyone can ever hear.

We pick up where we left off last week – Phillip is still in Samaria when an angel interrupts his involvement in the revival and tells him to travel many miles south to the desert road that linked Jerusalem and the port city of Gaza. He obeys, and while travelling the road, encounters the dust of a passing chariot carrying an Ethiopian Eunuch who is going home after a pilgrimage in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit prompts Phillip to go up and run alongside the chariot, where he hears the Ethiopian reading aloud from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Phillip asks him whether he understands what he is reading. Frustrated, the eunuch responds by asking how it is he can understand the prophet's words unless someone explains them to him. He then invites Phillip up into the chariot with him. What an odd couple!

The Ethiopian was reading the passage from Isaiah that speaks of a coming suffering servant. He asks Phillip whether Isaiah is speaking of himself or of another. With that invitation, and beginning with Isaiah's words, Phillip tells him about the good news of Jesus. We don't know how long they talked, or what exactly Phillip said, but whatever it was it was effective because the next thing we know the two men stop the chariot alongside some water where the Ethiopian Eunuch excitedly asks Phillip to baptize him – which Phillip does. In a few short verses, for him perhaps a few short hours, the Ethiopian Eunuch has gone from being spiritually frustrated and confused to a joy-filled follower of Jesus. It's a cracker of a story.

In this wonderful story there are some simple and yet profound principles we can draw about how we can approach Jesus' command to all who would follow him to share his good news:

First, be Expectant:

Our God is a God of surprises. God is unpredictable, wild and free in how he moves in our world, including how he uses us. It makes no sense that God would call Phillip away from the revival in Samaria. There is more work to be done – more souls to be saved. I reckon Phillip may well have said to the angel, ‘He wants me to go WHERE?’ But God does call Phillip away.

God chooses to use us, fragile, frail and fallible people to share the treasure of his good news with others. Some of us believe that we are too old, or too young, too new to faith or too set in our ways. But God wants to use all of us, and we should expect that like Phillip, he will call and use us – even if it seems to make no sense.

Years ago I was sitting in a lecture theatre in Brisbane. The teacher was droning on and on, and to stop myself from falling asleep, I started writing a letter to Sue. She kept it. Let me read and excerpt.

Here I am sitting in a hot and humid lecture theatre in Brisbane trying to stay awake. It's the humid weather that is knocking me about. We will never live north of Sydney if I can help it.

Famous last words.

Four years later we found ourselves in the board room talking with a search committee about the possibility of coming here to be the Lead Minister. It made no sense. Our families, our history – my professional reputation was all back in South Australia – as was a great job. We walked the property and Sue burst into tears. She said ‘This is where God wants us to be.’ I wasn’t so sure. I stalled. Two weeks later I was in NZ and we still hadn’t given an answer as to whether we would come. Then one day I read this very story of an angel calling Phillip to leave everything that seemed logical and right. This is what I wrote in my journal:

As I hear your voice Lord I have been deeply troubled – and yet I know that all things are possible to you. Like Phillip I am enjoying a season of ministry that will be incredibly hard to leave. But I know the future is in your hands – including the fruit of the ministry you are calling me into.

God said through to me through Phillip’s story, not south to Gaza, but north to Queensland for you sport. Although it made no sense then, for me at least, it now makes all the sense in the world.

Be expectant, God can and will call all of us to tell his good news in particular and surprising ways.

Second, be Listening.

In verse 29 we read :

The Spirit told Phillip, ‘Go to that chariot and stand near it.’ (Acts 8:29)

It begs the question – how did the Spirit speak to Phillip? Was it with an audible voice, through a sign, some writing in the sky, a vision or a feeling in his heart? We don’t know. All we know is the Spirit spoke and Phillip listened and then acted.

To be effective in evangelism we must listen for the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. But how do we do that? Well that is a sermon all on its own - but I can offer one overarching principle for hearing accurately the voice of God. Let me illustrate.

Sue and I have known each other more than 30 years. We grew up together. We have been married more than 20 years. With each passing year we get to know each other better still, to the point where we can communicate with each other non-verbally. At least, Sue can communicate with me non-verbally. Over the years I have come to appreciate that Sue has a 'look' for every occasion. With the raising of an eyebrow across a crowded room, she can make me wither. With the tilting of her head, she can make me – even me – shut up. With the pursing of her lips she can make me stutter and stammer. All without one word being spoken.

Rarely, if ever, will we hear God's voice audibly – out loud. But we will learn to hear God as we get to know God better – as we spend quality and quantity time with him. The more I read this book – the more God speaks. I get frustrated when people say to me that God doesn't speak to them when I find out they read their bible rarely, if at all. For God's sake, and for the sake of God's mission in the world - read this book! As well, it seems that the more I pray – the more the Holy Spirit prompts.

God is always speaking to every one of us. The question is not whether God is speaking, but are we really listening?

Be expectant, be listening...next be passionate.

Can you picture Phillip? A desert road, a chariot flinging up dust and grit and there he is puffing and panting running alongside, desperate for the opportunity to speak to the Ethiopian official about Jesus.

Phillip had a *'whatever it takes and whatever you ask, Lord attitude.'* He was passionate, committed, willing and obsessive about telling others about Jesus. The Great Commission wasn't just a nice idea, it was a command to be lived out every day. Such desperation comes from an understanding of what is at stake and what the gospel offers.

When it comes to evangelism, what is at stake is nothing less than the eternal destinies of men and women. The bible is clear - human beings are created to live for eternity. The bible also teaches that where we spend eternity – with God or apart from God – is our choice. The bible teaches us, and our creeds state, Jesus will one day come again to this earth, and when he does he will judge the living and the dead. There is a heaven and there is a hell, and people will go to one or the other. This is what we profess as orthodox, Christian belief.

If this is true, why aren't we desperate, obsessive and passionate about telling others about Jesus? Why aren't we running where God calls us for the chance to share good news? CS Lewis has said that:

The opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference. (C.S. Lewis)

If we truly are followers of Jesus, if we say we worship the God who is the embodiment of love, how can we ever be indifferent to a world of our friends, neighbors, relatives who face eternity apart from Christ?

I am thrilled so many of you are participating in our Winter College. All up, there is almost 200 enrolled in the various courses. On Wednesday night 140 came to hear Graham Leo's first session teaching from Revelation. Wonderful!

One of the other courses we offered through Winter College is Alpha. Alpha is an introductory course to the Christian faith. We are running Alpha with Ashmore Uniting Church. 60 people have enrolled – which is fantastic. Of those sixty, one is from our church. One!

Despite the fact that many of us have experienced personally the effectiveness of Alpha none of us, not one person, including me, has successfully invited someone to do Alpha. I know some invited friends who declined.

But how many of us did even that? Is it because we don't need Alpha because we are doing okay sharing faith already, or as I suspect, is it because we have fallen for the temptation that evangelism is not our job, but someone else's?

I constantly get feedback that people value the teaching ministry of this church. Teaching like Graham is offering on Wednesday night. But the bible is clear – faith without works, including the work of evangelism, is dead. The last word on this matter comes from Oswald Smith:

We talk of the second coming; half the world has not heard of the first! (Oswald Smith)

From Phillip's story we also discover we need to be Bold.

Phillip actively looked for the opportunity to share faith. Eavesdropping on the eunuch reading Isaiah he asks him whether he understands. With this question, a crack opens in the door of the Ethiopian's heart.

Sharing faith involves risk. In Australia, we risk ridicule and rejection. In other nations and at other times, other believers have risked their lives to share the gospel. Paul tells his student Timothy:

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:7-8a)

Be Bold, but we also must be Sensitive.

Here is a most critical point. Phillip does come with a set script or a tried and true model of evangelism. Phillip comes to the Ethiopian with an open heart and a listening ear. He is sensitive to the Ethiopian's questions and needs.

The Ethiopian was a seeker after truth. You don't travel hundreds of miles to Jerusalem unless you are. Because he was a eunuch, the Ethiopian would have been spiritually frustrated. (I said *spiritually* frustrated.) Even though he may have assented to Jewish belief and custom he could never, ever be accepted as a Jewish convert. Let me put it bluntly. When circumcision is the outward sign of faith for all Jewish males, the eunuch lacked an essential piece of anatomy to seal the deal, so to speak. If you still don't understand, ask Craig afterwards.

He was spiritually frustrated and confused – full of doubts and questions which his pilgrimage clearly had not answered. Phillip begins his life-transforming conversation with the eunuch by addressing directly his question, not by offering trite slogans or a standard script. The eunuch was confused by the meaning of Isaiah's word. Luke tells us that:

Then Phillip began with that very passage of Scripture... (Acts 8:35a)

In sharing faith effectively we always must start with people's questions, not with answers to questions they might not be asking.

Such a conversation might look like this:

Insert Drama 2

We must be bold and we also must be focused.

Luke tells us that:

Phillip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:35)

Phillip does not tell the eunuch about his adventures in Samaria or his job as a church leader. He tells him about Jesus. His conversation is focused on the only treasure he has to offer.

We can fall for the temptation of believing that when we talk about faith we need to offer great wisdom and insight. But in offering the gospel we offer all the wisdom the world will ever see or experience.

We can fall for the temptation of believing our friends are looking for good advice, pointers for a happier life. But our world is drowning in a sea of so called 'good advice' when it desperately needs to hear Good News!

Evangelism is much simpler than all of this. Simply:

Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. (D.T Niles)

I have nothing to offer others of any worth except the story of Jesus crucified and risen and the liberation this good news has brought my life. I have nothing else to offer. But in sharing this Good News, I have – we have – everything to offer.

We are almost at the end. We have discovered that in sharing faith with others, we must be expectant, listening, passionate, bold, sensitive and focused. Finally, as we take this adventurous risk we will be blessed!

After he is baptized the Ethiopian continues his long journey home rejoicing.

Joy always accompanies new found faith. My favorite day of the church year is without doubt Easter Sunday. I love going down to Currumbin Creek where each year we baptize people. I love seeing their joy, their friend's joy. I love hearing their joy-filled stories and seeing their joy-filled tears. Their joy becomes my joy. And I am truly blessed.

Emily just celebrated her 15th birthday and Joel is about to turn 17. I know it is a cliché, but it only seems like yesterday that I was in the delivery room experiencing the miracle of their birth. Nothing prepared me for holding them for the first time. Wonder, awe, love – and joy, unspeakable, immeasurable joy. Joy that overflowed with tears. Joy that made my heart burst.

We are born into this world once. But we have the opportunity of being born again into God's eternal kingdom. And Jesus tells us that when one person is born again –when one wayward son or daughter repents and turns towards home, all heaven rejoices. The angels burst with joy, they sing, they shout, they clap. Heaven overflows with joy as God celebrates the adoption of another precious one into his family.

This is what I want to give my life to.

Imagine the mystery and delight of not just hearing, but seeing the story of Jesus for the first time, almost as an eyewitness.

That's what happened to a tribe of East Asia when missionaries showed them the *Jesus* film. Not only had these people never heard of Jesus, they had never seen a movie. On one unforgettable evening, they saw it all—the gospel in their own language, visible and real.

Imagine how it felt to see this good man, Jesus, who healed the sick and was adored by children, held without trial and beaten by jeering soldiers. As they watched this, the people came unglued. They stood up and began to shout at the cruel men on the screen, demanding that this outrage stop.

When nothing happened, they attacked the missionary running the projector. Perhaps he was responsible for this injustice! He was forced to stop the film and explain that the story wasn't over yet; there was more. So they settled back onto the ground, holding their emotions in tenuous check.

Then came the crucifixion. Again, the people could not hold back. They began to weep and wail with such loud grief that, once again, the film had to be stopped. The missionary again tried to calm them, explaining that the story still wasn't over; there was more. So they composed themselves and sat down to see what happened next.

Then came the resurrection. Pandemonium broke out this time, but for a different reason. The gathering had spontaneously erupted into a party. The noise now was of jubilation, and it was deafening. The people were dancing and slapping each other on the back. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Again the missionary had to shut off the projector; this time he didn't tell them to calm down and wait for what was next. All that was supposed to happen—in the story and in their lives—was happening.

Theodore Williams puts it like this:

We face a humanity that is too precious to neglect. We know a remedy for the ills of the world too wonderful to withhold. We have a Christ too glorious to hide. We have an adventure too thrilling to miss.
(Theodore Williams)

We have the greatest story, the most wonderful good news to share. For God's sake, for the world's sake, for the kingdom's sake – we must share it.