

27th September 2020 10 am Sharing the Good News of Jesus

Introduction to the talk (including reading) by Fiona Dowle,

Talk by Andrew Attwood, Prayerful response by Denise Coomber

This transcript is only of the introduction, the talk and the prayerful response.

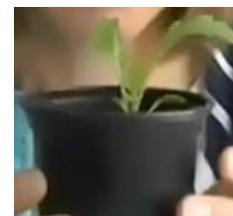
Introduction to the service

[Fiona Dowle:]

Good morning. Some of you will know that I enjoy growing things, especially things that can be eaten, and at the start of each year I have an idea and think what can I grow that I've maybe not grown before. And this year for the first time I decided to have a go at growing broccoli. So where did it all start? Well, here are some seeds – that's the packet I used: it's actually purple sprouting broccoli, so that's quite exciting. So I got my seeds. They're really tiny, I don't know if you can see them there? So these tiny seeds I prepared some compost in little pots. And I began to sow them. But let's imagine for a moment that something happened while I was sowing them, that some of them slipped out of my fingers, and they rolled off and I lost track of where they were. And some of them ended up down in the crack in the paving, and some ended up in a little weedy area, and basically I lost sight of them. So, the conditions for those seeds are pretty much not ideal. And whether they would germinate? I don't know, maybe they would, but if they did, the roots probably wouldn't be great and the flourishing potential of that plant was going to be minimal.



So thankfully the seeds I sowed, they did germinate. And although I've not got them now, I've got an example: they started off like a little plant, maybe quite small, but I then took some care and attention, giving them water, and then later when they got a bit bigger I was searching through to find if there are any eggs that had been laid by the butterflies, because I didn't want caterpillars then munching the leaves. So the good news is they have now grown. I can't show you them in the garden but this morning I cut off one of the leaves so you can get an idea of the sort of the scale of the plants: that's just one leaf of one of the plants, and so it's pretty big, quite impressive. And thankfully now we've even got a few tasty broccoli stems – you can see they're delightful, really tasty!



And so you might be thinking, "Well, how does that link to our theme of sharing the Good News of Jesus?" And, well, the word of God is like the seed. The seed needs to be sown, the Message needs sharing. So, we don't know when we share the Message of Jesus and the Good News, how it's going to be received, you know, will somebody respond? What will their hearts be like? The Bible says that the seed falling on good soil is like somebody who



hears the Word and understands it. It's not a failure if some of the seeds that we sow don't germinate, in that sense. It's our calling to serve, and to share the Word. And just as with the seeds that I've sown this year, without the sowing, there wouldn't be a harvest. So, why not in the days ahead, ask God to show you, "who can I share the Good News with?" Be a sower, because in the end of Matthew it says we're called to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations, and that's part of our calling, to sow the Word of God.

Reading: 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. **15** For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. **16** To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

This is the word of the Lord.

Talk

[Fiona:] [13:19]

So we now look forward to hearing Andrew bring God's Word for us today, and before I hand over to him, let me pray for him now.

Father God, I want to ask for Your blessing on Andrew. I thank You for him. And I pray that You will help him to share Your truth and Your word for us today. In Jesus name,
Amen.

[Andrew Attwood:]

Amen. Thank you, Fiona. Thanks very much, folks, and great to be here again on another day. It's still a bit sunny out there at the moment. The leaves are changing, everything is shifting season, isn't it? And yet we're still in this very complicated year. 2020 has not turned out as we thought. In the meantime, I want to encourage you to see these occasions, these Sundays, as training times, so that we can be continuously open to God, to hear what He wants us to learn. Even when our circumstances are increasingly hemmed in by this coronavirus situation, we don't know what's coming next, we don't know how things are going to track out. But in the meantime, let's learn, and let's learn together.

I want to talk to you this morning about how the Gospel works in practice. But before I do that, it's important that we do a recap. It's important that we remember what we've already been learning over the last few weeks:

- I said many weeks ago, the world really really needs the Gospel because the human race is lost. I'm getting increasingly used to thinking along these lines: the Bible teaches it plainly, that the whole human race is separated from God and is therefore currently lost. The Bible uses strong words about that, it talks about the human race perishing, and so the urgency and the importance of the Gospel is really, really high.
- I then went on to talk on another week about the content of the Gospel, that the content of the Gospel is explicitly for the forgiveness of sins. It's for the overcoming of evil, it's so that King Jesus can come and reign, but the means by which He does that is by dying for the forgiveness of sin. So the content of the Gospel is very, very important: you have to know the Gospel if you're going to be able to apply the Gospel.
- It's also an emphasis on the importance of it, because it's Jesus' legacy. Fiona already made reference there to the great commission that Jesus said, "Go therefore": it's what we should remember, and emulate, and say,

if we are best to represent Jesus, the Gospel is profoundly important, because remember, even Jesus says it's the only way that lost humanity can be saved.

So, given the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, how can we actually share it? Well, I wanted to start with our attitude in the first instance, and compare it just to a little verse, a famous verse from Romans 1. Romans 1:16 says this, this is Paul speaking right at the beginning of his famous letter to the Romans, he says this:

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.

Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel." In other words, there was a kind of appropriate pride in it, there was a confidence in it, because he knew it had power in it. I wonder how you feel about the Gospel, in all honesty? My gut feeling, these days, particularly in the current cultural climate, is that there are many Western Christians who are indeed ashamed of the Gospel. And how might I say that? Because how many of us actually do regularly, confidently share it as it is? Maybe some people do share some things, but do we modify what we share to suit our hearers? Do we talk about other things instead of the Gospel? Do we pride ourselves on our ethical or social action as a church? Do we pride ourselves on the fact that we're a loving community or do we hold back on actually saying the sharing, saving message of the Gospel itself? Do we back off for all kinds of social pressures? I wonder if we are at a point in Western Christian history where we have changed the message to suit the audience's perceived preferences.

Maybe we need to rethink our attitude towards the Gospel. But think about that passage that Fiona led us to: Paul describes his own experience of sharing the Gospel, as bringing a kind of aroma, a fragrance, a perfume amongst people. And he says, "For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ, amongst those who are being saved *and* to those who are perishing," so he talks about different reactions to him sharing this message: to one we are an aroma where that brings death, to another an aroma that brings life. "And who is equal to such a task?" He admits that this is a challenging thing, to bring the Gospel in front of people who've never heard it. He also acknowledges that he's in a cultural context too. If I were to read to you from 1 Corinthians 1, so he's still writing to the same people but just in the earlier letter. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 is fascinating, because Paul does a kind of a critique as to how people generally tend to respond to his message according to culture. This is what he says:

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. **19** For it is written:

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? **21** For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him,

And this is the important bit:

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.
and he talks about different responses now:

22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified: a

stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Paul was pretty expert at understanding the different racial, religious and cultural contexts that he was in. I mean, he came from Tarsus. He's really knowledgeable of both Greek and Roman culture. He's embedded in Jewish culture, and he understands how to navigate both Jew and Gentile worlds really well. But what did Paul do? He did adapt how he communicated the Gospel, but he never changed it, he never changed the content. And so he experimented by sharing this message in different places. He knew that for Jews, they would be looking for signs and wonders that would confirm the rightness of this message. They were looking for, for example, a Messiah who would come and take over again and set people free. That was going to be different though, because of how Jesus did it. Greeks on the other hand were looking for kind-of insight and clever wisdom, clever philosophy because that's more their kind of thing. Paul did not adapt the message though, he didn't want to do that. He wanted to turn it around. We tend to adapt what we say to fit people. Paul, on the other hand, used the Gospel as it is, as a way of finding out who is open or not. Have you ever thought about that? The Gospel is actually the way by which we discover who is open. I'll just pause for a moment. What is your first thought when imagining the sharing of the Gospel with someone, maybe someone that you know, or even someone that you've just met? Is that an awkward, or even an offensive thing to do? Is it like quietly admitting to an embarrassing personal secret, or is it your pride and joy? Is it like naming your favourite football team where you proudly say, "This is who I'm who I'm with", or is it like saying "You know what? I used to have cancer and now I've been cured by these brilliant doctors"? How are you feeling at the thought of sharing the Gospel?

I just wonder, because we need to change our attitude to fit in with how Jesus communicated it, how Paul thought about it, where he presented it as a way of assessing people rather than changing what he wanted to say to please people. Let me remind you of what Jesus said to the seventy-two others who he sent out, that's mentioned in Luke 10. Jesus had a B-team. Jesus had the A-team with the twelve, but he also had a B-team. And they were also people who are on the receiving end of some training, and he sent them out with almost identical words to the twelve, and he sent them out with these kinds of words:

'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. **3** Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.

4 Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

Important part:

5 'When you enter a house, first say, "Peace to this house." **6** If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. **7** Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

8 'When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you.

So when Jesus was describing the means, the approach of sharing His Good News with people, He gave quite specific approaches to His first followers. It very much parallels that picture that Fiona gave us, to do with sowing seed, that idea of scattering seed in all kinds of directions, why? To find out where the good soil is, to find out who is open. When Fiona was describing what she did with her broccoli, she said, "It's possible that some of it would go in different places and you don't know, it might spring up," but your kind-of eye, your gardener's eye is "where it is going to grow properly?" At the end of

Jesus' parable on the sower, He says, "Whoever has ears let them hear." Even Jesus was needing to watch and wait to see whose ears would prick up because they understood what was being shared. So, this is the first conclusion I want to point you to: though the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all, and that's why we should scatter it in all directions, not all are open or ready to receive it.

I think sometimes we can feel daunted at this prospect of an obligation to somehow persuade all, to convince all, to use clever argument or presentation so that a large majority are going to nod at it. That is not what Jesus said, it's not what Paul did, it's not what the early disciples did. The Gospel is to be connecting to those who are responsive. In that passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul says that the Gospel and ourselves are a pleasing aroma to those who are open, but to those who are perishing, to use his words, it's the smell of death.

You know I sometimes have experimented myself where I will share things. I will throw a line out here or there depending on whom I'm with, to see what kind of response, and sometimes there is a negative response or a disinterestedness. Is that a problem to me? Not really, I'm beginning to get used to the fact that it's not the Gospel that I need to be worried about, changing it to make it more acceptable to people. I'm simply using the Gospel to navigate who's open. You see, Jesus shares it with all, but His eye is looking for those who are responsive. He did not - and this is an important part too - He did not equally invest in all. He particularly invested in those who were open. If you were to read your way through all of Mark's Gospel, you can do a Bible study where you will see that Jesus attracted crowds, but He never gave Himself to crowds, He was never wooed by the crowd, He was never looking for numbers. He was looking for those who are open. That is the important message for today, that we need to understand the Gospel, and then simply share it widely, to identify those few who are open. So this is an explicit principle that is important that we need to learn. So like the twelve learned it, and the seventy-two learned it, there's something about this, to do with saving energy, avoiding confusion and avoiding disappointment.

I don't know about you, but simply the idea of sharing the Gospel can sound exhausting. If we were to think of our town, our home town of Kenilworth, we could simply feel like "Oh my gosh! 20-something-thousand people, most of whom who don't necessarily commit themselves to following Jesus. That's too many!" Absolutely it is. How many Christians are there? How many real true Christians are there? Just a small number in comparison to the population. So, what does Jesus guide us to do with His precious Gospel? He says to save energy, to avoid confusion and disappointment, sow, but then concentrate on who is responsive. We are not called to try and convert all, we are to seek out the house, a household, or the person of peace - you remember from that passage I read from Luke 10. What does it mean to seek out the household or the person of peace? I'll tell you in a minute what their characteristics are, but I want to encourage the church to draw back from trying to persuade or win people who do not want to be won. There may well be people that you know, friends or even relatives who are not or will not ever be ready. We therefore have to be more realistic about how we share and how we sow, and what we concentrate on, because you and I are finite. Even Jesus, when He was here in the flesh, was limited to one place, and He concentrated His efforts, so that He would be more fruitful. Likewise, we need to limit our efforts as Jesus and the disciples did.

I could be even more blunt about it: you may remember when Jesus was describing things to the twelve and the seventy-two, He talked also about people or towns that didn't receive their wonderful Good News. And He said, "Move on. Move on, if people aren't receptive, if you can't find any people of peace, any households that are responsive and open." He said, "Shake the dust from your feet as a sign to them." Now we cringe at the idea of this because we in the West, we in UK, we in middle-class contexts think that that sounds so offensive, the idea of moving on because someone's not responsive. I think we need to get

over that. This is designed to save our energies. What is the point of banging your head against a brick wall? We are meant to be a public witness to all. We are meant to be a witness even to those who reject the message, but we are not to stay there wasting our energy over and over again, hoping and praying and talking and talking, if there is no openness. So we need to get over that idea, and then choose a different approach. The sharing of the Gospel is to be led by the Spirit, and experimenting to see who is responsive to the Gospel message itself.

So back to this idea of seeking out people of peace. Paul did say earlier that the Gospel is like a lovely aroma, a life-giving aroma, to some people, but who are they? When Jesus was talking to the seventy-two, He talked about people who would welcome you in, people who actually are hospitable to you, and they're interested, they're willing to receive both you as a friend, and maybe even the message that you bring, without lots of contention. They may have questions, they may wonder about it and be confused by parts of it. But if there is a person that is simply friendly to you, someone who is keen to have you around, someone who's keen to relate well to you, and they like you. And maybe that is a sign that there is something of God's openness in there, something that God has done in their hearts that gets them ready. And in a few weeks Michelle is going to talk about what the Holy Spirit does in people that opens them up to the Gospel, but just in a general sense, people who are welcoming to you and your message, that's a sign. It said in that passage, "Stay there eating and drinking whatever they offer you." Sometimes the Christian church gets the wrong idea about evangelism. Sometimes we think it's something that we do to people. We put things on, we run things for people, but actually in Jesus' description, He's describing these travelling people who come to villages, who are actually in need themselves, because they're not carrying very much. And people welcome them in and they're hospitable to them. "Stay there eating and drinking whatever they offer you." In other words, some people of peace actually look after *us* a little bit. They keep an eye out for us, they're expressing the grace and their openness, being kind to us. And when you find that kind of reciprocal friendship, where it's mutual and they're not just on the receiving end from what we're doing, then Jesus says, "Don't move around. Invest there. That is a key sign that someone is open."

I could give you an example, even in recent days and weeks: I've still found that even during lockdown, using Zoom, or going for walks, I can still spend time with people who aren't Christians, people who may want to talk things through, people who may want to explore faith, even by Zoom. I can have conversations where I am building some kind of connection, some kind of relationship where it's not just talking about God all the time, it's talking about life, it's sharing our ups and downs, our vulnerabilities too. And in that context it's still possible to say, "So what do you think about Jesus then?" You know, some people will ask me, "Well, I know what you think." And I say, "Well, what do *you* think? What do you really, really believe? Do you have an understanding, for example, that there's something wrong with the world?" And I was talking to someone just in recent days, who recognised, "Yeah, you know what? There's brokenness out there. In fact there's brokenness in *here*." You can do that, even in this current context. And I'm finding a greater level of confidence, using lines like that to find out who is a person that is open - that person of peace.

It was so lovely the other day just to kind of invite a person to take a step. And they were able to kind of nod and pray their first prayer of openness to Jesus - really exciting! You can do it even now, even on Zoom, you can do it. But one of the things that has gone from my life in recent times after studying the Gospel more and more, is I'm not carrying a weight on my shoulders, that I have to persuade all. I do feel a responsibility to scatter seed in all directions, because I don't know who's open. But when I start to see some responsiveness, that's when I focus a little bit more. And we do this kind-of

sharing thing until we can share the Gospel clearly and openly and maybe even lead to commitment in Jesus Christ. So that idea of how we share is really important - so that we lose the anxiety, we lose the embarrassment and we simply share it as it is, and use the Gospel as a way of gauging who is open.

So I'm going to finish in a minute, with just an opportunity for you to reflect on where you're at with this. Are you still presently carrying a bit of shame and awkwardness over the Gospel? I just want to give you a minute of quiet, to ask God, perhaps for some forgiveness, because the Gospel is nothing we should be ashamed of. The Gospel is the power of God for those who have been saved. So just take a minute. If you need to confess embarrassment over the Gospel, over Jesus, just confess that to God now, in a moment of quiet.

[pause]

Lord would You forgive us for being coy, awkward or embarrassed about your Gospel, forgive us, Lord.

And let me continue to pray for us,

Lord, would You help us to focus in on how to do this more effectively. Lord, would You help us to give time to the right people. Would You teach us to share things widely. Would You help us to experiment with hospitality, receiving it, as well as giving it. Would You help us, Lord, to discern who is willing to hear. And also, Lord, would You help us to be more realistic and honest, when we need to move on.
Amen.

I just want to say then, to conclude, this approach to sharing the Gospel is not rude, it's not functional and dismissive of the majority. It's simply obeying what Jesus taught us to do. I've got this running idea in my head that the Devil, that Satan would love to tie the church up, focusing on people who aren't open. I would, I could easily imagine the Devil saying, "concentrate on your kids, concentrate on your neighbours, concentrate on your best friends," when actually, some of them may be closed, some of them may not yet be open, and I want you to be free to go experimenting, to go sowing seed in other spaces to find the open people that God has for us.

So one final prayer. Let's pray.

Lord, we love the Good News of Jesus Christ. We love that though we were lost, we have been found, because Jesus has died for our sins. Would You fill us with confidence now, in the power of the Gospel. And would You call us into obedience so that we share it, like Jesus taught us to. I ask this in Jesus' Holy Name.
Amen.

I'm going to hand over now.

Prayerful Response

[Denise Coomber:]

Let's pray.

We praise You, Father, that when we were far away You brought us near by the blood of Christ. Thank You that You love us so much that You want us to be in a relationship with You. And we pray that we will have opportunities to share Your Good News with those around us, so that those You have chosen can be included in Your family. Help us to know what Your Good News is, and to make us bold, to share the power of God and not to be ashamed, to be a pleasing aroma to those we meet. Help us to preach Christ crucified to those who need to hear in an understandable way, that's relevant to them, and help us to recognise the people of peace we meet, and to make the most of every opportunity to share Your Good News and sow seed where You direct us, to those who are open and ready to receive it.
[Amen.]

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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