**PROMOTING THE GOSPEL IN DAILY CONVERSATION**

**26th March 2023**

*Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1Pe 3:8-18)*

*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col 4:2-6)*

So…

we love to talk about our passions, our interests, things we love to do, our family…

In fact you can tell what people are interested in…

just by listening to their conversations.

Sport, health, the weather, holidays and families seem to dominate for most people.

I was with a neighbour the other day…

just helping him pick up a bed and only together for half an hour or so….

Well… For most of that time we talked about his financial plans.

Which is not surprising given that…

He is getting near retirement…

He is a person who has a number of property investments…

And he has always been keen on making good, wise and thoughtful decisions.

As a result these realities, these interests are clearly dominating his thoughts

And his conversation!

We talk about what we are interested in!

I experience this same thing when listening to the parents at play group.

Although the topics are different!

Parenting, sleep, feeding, children’s health, tiredness…

all of these topics come up regularly.

This is what is dominating their thoughts and changed their lives

This is what they are interested in

This is what they talk about

We talk about what we love and what is dominating our lives!

So it is fair to assume – those of us who have met and been transformed by Jesus…

will want to talk about him.

The topic will come up given half a chance.

And certainly in the safety and comfort of the church community

When in the presence of brothers and sisters in Christ…

it is not unusual for us to speak about how our faith has sustained us,

prayer is important

or how knowing God’s love has been invaluable.

“I don’t know how others cope if they don’t know God”

might be a phrase we would hear regularly.

However, for many of us the natural, everyday reference to our faith is often not as common as it could be in our normal day to day relationships.

We may refrain or restrict what we say or how we say it…

Now… this is often for good motives.

Perhaps out of a desire not to offend or make people feel uncomfortable

Perhaps because we think it sounds foolish

Or perhaps because we are afraid of their reaction.

Although, sadly it could be because the reality of Jesus in our lives has lost its zing.

But before we get to this, lets turn to our passages for today.

Passages in which both Peter and Paul call us to

*“know how to, or give an answer to, everyone”*

So similar that it’s as if they had agreed together on this important task, to: *“Be ready and willing to give an answer to those who do not yet believe”*

So what do we learn from these rich passages.

1. **All believers have the responsibility to answer for their faith**

Now, it is important to note – he is not telling us that we should all be evangelists.

Every one of us has to stand on the street corner preaching,

or go door to door seeking opportunities to talk about Jesus

Yes some have that passion, gift and privilege (see 1 Tim 4:5).

But it is not for all of us.

I hope that is comforting.

However, all of us, whoever we are,

should be ready and willing to speak up for Jesus when given the opportunity.

To use our everyday ordinary conversation to share our faith.

To use words to convey something of our hope.

Imagine you are sitting over a cuppa after watching a movie with a friend,

It’s been a movie that has raised some sad and difficult things.

Facing death, dealing with the challenges of aging,

coping with separation from those you love.

In the course of the conversation your friend says: “I am terrified of that happening to me. I just can’t imagine how I will cope. What about you?”

So what do you do, what do you say?

The encouragement of both Peter and Paul, is not to rush off and find your pastor

Or even to bravely invite them to Church

But to be ready to speak of the hope you have, the strength God will give…

because of your relationship with Him.

To answer in such a way – is both our responsibility and our privilege.

1. **You will need to be ready with a range of responses to a range of situations**

In our English translation, both Peter and Paul are calling us to give an “answer”

But they each use a different word.

Paul uses a Greek work which refers to a simple “reply”

Not necessarily a reply to a specific question, but more a response to a comment

It is a sort of catch all term for any statement we might offer in response to a query

or a statement, or even something that happens.

A work colleague might ask: “why do you go to Church?”

A family member might declare: “Religion isn’t relevant for me!”

Or a golfer may comment after a lucky break “Someone’s on my side!”

Mind you it doesn’t mean we have to wait until someone says something.

Whether prompted or unprompted,

Paul is encouraging us to infuse our conversation with references

to how Jesus makes a difference in our lives.

To be natural in talking about God.

Peter on the other hand uses a more precise word.

A word that means “defence”.

In the context Peter seems to be thinking about how we respond to people who criticise or accuse us because of our good works.

In the times Peter was writing, Christians were often criticised, or worse,

for their particular way of life.

Rejecting idol worship was challenging.

To worship Idols was a civic duty to help protect the city.

Shunning orgies and drunkenness was seen as prudish and antisocial.

Even a critique and judgement of those who did such things (see 1 Peter 4:4).

Our response?

To cop the accusation on the chin and to defend our actions

by *“speaking of the reason for our hope, with gentleness and respect.” 1 Peter 3:15*

Are we not facing these same accusations and criticism today?

Christians are seen as bigoted and prejudiced because our stance on sexual ethics

Or judged because of statements or conduct of high profile Christians…

Or dismissed as naive and anti intellectual because of our belief in miracles…

Are you ready to give a reasons for your hope with “gentleness and respect”

when these issues are raised by your friends?

Perhaps within our life groups, you could be practising how to respond?

Do some role plays at home with your kids.

Read some books or attend some courses on apologetics

on how to respond when these situations arise.

3 quick pointers to get you started.

* Don’t respond with what you think – until you have listened well and are sure you understand what they are saying.
* Don’t try and give a gospel download and tell them all you know then and there! Be brief.
* And make sure your response is with gentleness and respect.

Which brings me to the third thing we discover from these passages.

1. **The manner of our reply is more important than the content**

The content – what we say – will be, is always, determined by the context.

The comment, question or situation we are responding to.

But the manner in which we respond is always the same and is clear

It is up to us.

It is critical!

And both of the apostles told us about **how** we were to answer!

Paul says our responses are to always be *“full of grace, seasoned with salt”*

Now, he doesn’t mean – the doctrine of grace must be included every time we speak.

But rather the generosity of God (His grace)

must shape the character of our conversation.

How we speak and respond.

We are to speak graciously.

His addition of “seasoned with salt” emphasises this.

He is not suggesting we should make what we say tasty, spicy or even interesting!

Though that may help!

What he is saying is that we are to “season (salt) our words with graciousness”

Peter, uses a very different word, but is telling us the same thing!

Which is especially crucial when defending ourselves.

How many of us get hot-headed when in an argument.

Or when trying to stand up for something we believe is right.

It becomes so easy to lose all graciousness in our efforts to defend the gospel,

or Christian values,

or when someone says or does something offensive!

What Peter is reminding us is that how we come across, how we are received…

is more important than what we say.

We may have every right to speak…

What we say may be the absolute truth…

And what they did is just so unfair, or offensive…

But if we are heard as judgmental, critical, arrogant, or just higher than thou…

we have actually discredited the gospel!

This is so critical in our context today.

As Christian values in our society are being undermined…

Often not overtly – which would be easier to address.

But assumed. In the court of public opinion, in the media, via comedy

There is so little respect, gentleness or grace

in how people speak about Christians and the Church…

that it would be easy to respond in kind! In the same manner!

We must not! We cannot.

To do so is to discredit the very faith and hope we are trying to share.

So remember - the manner with which we respond is more important than the content

And in particular can I implore you to consider anything you may write or post

on Social media.

1. **Finally – Who Jesus is to us, is essential.**

Authenticity is the key.

Because while we need to be thinking about what we say and how we say it…

if it is not a reflection of our reality – it will show.

Techniques, a list of appropriate replies, tools to ensure we respond graciously…

All of these things can be helpful…

but must not, cannot be a substitute for our own reality.

As a result there is nothing more essential than for Jesus to be real for us.

I began suggesting that we talk about what we love,

what interests us,

what makes a difference to us.

If you are facing a health crises – it dominates our thoughts – and our words!

If you have just got engaged…

organising the impending wedding keeps you awake at night.

If you are in the process of moving or renovating your house…

you are constantly making lists!

And when things dominate our thoughts – it often spills out in our words!

So, the most essential thing we can do, our most critical “activity”…

is to be close to Jesus.!

We see this in our two passages for today.

In fact Peter finishes with it

Paul begins with it.

Peter reminds us of what Jesus has done and what that means for us

Paul talks to us of what we can do in response. To keep our relationship close

Peter writes: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, being put to death in the flesh that he might bring us to God,.., 1 Peter.3:18*

Remember, “Jesus died for us.

And by his death we are brought into right relationship with God!”

We know this!

We have been taught this since we first connected with the Church!

We are reminded of it when we read the Scriptures,

sing songs of worship,

or engage in conversations with sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is the gospel, the good news that has changed us,

the truth that sets us free,

brings us lives and gives us hope.

But does it dominate our thoughts?

My guess is – if you are anything like me – the challenges of life…

The opportunities we are given…

The joy that can be found in so many other good things…

Even the familiarity of this fact

All of these can cause us to take it all for granted!

Peter knew this – and so reminds his readers of this reality.

What do you do to be reminded of it?

How do you allow the wonder, the glory, the beauty…

the incredible, remarkable, unbelievable fact

that the Almighty Holy, Creator God – became flesh, and died for me…

because He loves me and wants to spend eternity with me!

How do you ensure the truth of this is not lost.

But continues to captivate, dominate your thoughts? PAUSE

As we allow this to happen – then it will also come out in our words

Because we talk about what we love and what is dominating our lives!

Paul, names one very concrete thing to do at the beginning of today’s passage: *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Col 4:2*

Pray. Spend time listening to and speaking with the Father God

Be attentive to what he is saying (you can hear this when you read his words to us)

And be thankful.

Although to be honest – will you have any choice!?

How can you do anything but have hearts filled with gratitude

when you read of Jesus caring for the outcast,

taking notice of the overlooked,

welcoming the sinner,

healing the broken and restoring the sinner.

Knowing all the time – this is how he treats me!

How can you not do anything but have hearts filled with praise? PAUSE

So, if you are finding it hard to speak about Jesus…

If you are finding it challenging to live lives that promote the good news…

If you have little passion to spend time with…

or pray for your non-Christian connections…

The way forward is not to pull your socks up,

brace yourself,

grit your teeth and do it anyway…

It’s not to learn new skills, or gain confidence as a salesman…

It is to get closer to Jesus

To be reminded of his love

It is to live in the reality of his grace

It is to fall in love with Jesus again.