**MAY MISSION MONTH – CROSSING THE STREET**

**1 Thes 2:1-12 29th May 2022**

I was 25, just completed my training for Baptist ministry, been married for 4 years and we had Ben, then 18 months old.

Of the team, we were the experienced, knowledgeable and wise ones!

Experts in all things pertaining to theology, marriage and child rearing!!!

At least that was the position I was put in when on a short term mission trip to the Highlands of PNG with a group of South Australian young people.

Those were the days when we believed that mission was about external experts coming in to do significant ministry and help these poor ignorant people.

We had come to run a series of leadership classes for young leaders in of the area.

The team did their stuff – sung songs, did dramas and puppet shows and shared their testimonies.

We talked about biblical leadership and the need to be models of godliness…

all good stuff.

At the end of the session there was question time when a whole range of issues were raised and answers by the Australian ‘experts’ were given!

But then someone asked - (though not exactly in these words) - “When is it right for me to be intimate with my wife again after she gives birth to a child?”

At this point, all eyes turned to me – After all I was the only one married with a child. Therefore I should know these things!

What would you say?

As we debriefed, I asked one of the local senior leaders about the question.

He began to give some context:

It is considered morally wrong to be intimate while your wife is breast feeding

It is not uncommon to breast feed until a child is 4 or 5.

As a consequence many men find other women during this period!

Causing spread of HIV and other diseases along

with ongoing difficulties within the marriage.

And his was just the tip of the cultural context that surrounded that question

Not knowing any of this, how could I possibly give any useful biblical perspective to the question I was asked.

At best it would be unhelpful and inadequate.

At worse I could cause serious difficulty.

This is just one example of the need to understand the culture and language of those to whom we seek to share the things of God.

And its obvious in cross cultural settings.

To look someone in the eye in some cultures is exceedingly rude,

to not do so in ours is to communicate you are not listening.

Holding hands in public is fine here – a lovely expression of love and devotion.

In other cultures not acceptable, unless it is a same sex friend or brother

– and in PNG it is then even ok to walk around holding their buttock!

This need to understand the other, in order to communicate effectively

touches all parts of what we do and say.

And this is especially true if we want to talk with people about matters of faith…

It is imperative we need to understand something of their language and culture

so that we can communicate it in a way they understand. PAUSE

As a Church we are committed to partnering with Baptism Mission Australia and their intercultural workers in South East Asia and Cambodia.

This month we are focusing on their work in Cambodia.

One of the things we discover about Baptist Mission Australia is their commitment to learn the language and culture of the people they serve.

To share the Gospel with them it is vital they understand them a little and can speak in their “heart language”

But the same is also true for us.

This is a challenge.

Most of the people we spend time with – our family, friends, neighbours etc….

look like us, speak the same language and appear to have similar values

And so we assume they think like us!

But the reality is often far different!

Paul knew this and so writes in 1 Cor.9 *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.(1Co 9:19-23)*

Everything Paul did, and all the things he said… was shaped by his need to

genuinely identify with… get alongside… cross the street…

to those he wanted to share the good news.

Because He knew this was the only way!

It is learning the language and culture for our intercultural workers is so important

And it is why we need to take the time to listen, to understand…

what really matters for those to whom we go.

In a moment I will be giving you an exercise.

I will be giving out a description of someone I know, perhaps like someone you know

Before we can help people understand what it would mean to meet and know Jesus,

we need to know and understand them.

And to ask how does the good news of the Kingdom speak to who they are, where they are at.

But before we have some time to think and chat about this…

I want to just share some learnings I have from our intercultural workers.

Some things to consider when we try and cross the street and enter the world of others...

How should the culture and belief of those we live among affect our own language and communication.

Allow me to make some observations:

**Belief/Faith.**

At least one thing this means is that head knowledge is not enough.

Ones relationship with Jesus must be making a difference.

As such - being a follower of Jesus must be a spiritual and life changing experience.

We need to know Jesus as our friend.

If what you believe doesn't work, if it isn't life changing, for you…

then it will be of no interest for anyone else.

However it is also vital that our understanding of the gospel is well founded.

We need to know what we believe – and why.

Concepts like Repentance, Faith, Grace, Forgiveness and a Relationship with God need to be both understood and experienced.

The indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit must be a living reality not just a theory, belief or words.

**Language**

Here perhaps is where we have to do the most work as many of our words will be misunderstood or heard negatively, and therefore should be avoided:

When we say the word “**Church**” – what do people think?

It probably has different connotations that what we intend.

It may be better to say 'a community of people who follow Jesus'

or 'a spiritual community'.

The word 'spiritual' connects with many, and will surprise others who thought that a Christian is someone who is just 'religious'!

Or when you talk about “**my faith**” – my guess is people think superstitious belief rather than assurance of hope.

It may be better to talk about 'your friendship with Jesus' if that is what you mean!

And to talk of being a “**Christian**” may not be a positive thing at all – rather, it would be better to describe yourself as being a 'follower of Jesus'.

This is more descriptive and carries with it less baggage.

**'God'** may be safer than 'Jesus' – but God is also less specific, more ambiguous and therefore may not communicate what you really mean.

**Grace** is not understood at all. All Australian’s know that there is 'no such thing as a free lunch!' so for most, being a Christian/religious etc. has with it connotations of 'behaving in such a way as to ensure you get to heaven'.

Now we know - I hope – that this is wrong.

After all Religion is spelt: DO – it is all about what I do.

But the Gospel is spelt DONE – because it is all about what Jesus has done for us!

Finally, with all the misunderstandings and preconceptions, be aware it will take lots of clear, concise, persistent communication to help people understand what it will mean for them to become followers of Jesus. And this will take time.

**Lifestyle**

Given the need for ongoing clear communication - relationships and long term involvement is a must if we want to see people come to know the Lord Jesus.

They need to see what we say 'works' before they will consider it for themselves.

And what they need to see is not that we are better than others,

or that I am committed to 'Church',

or that you believe certain truths,

but that the Person of Jesus, who he is and what he does,

makes a real difference to who we are.

They will need to see **Grace** in our life – if they are to believe in Grace from God

**Forgiveness, joy** and **hope** will need to be evident, if they are to become interested in hearing of the forgiveness, joy and Hope that are promised in the Gospel.

And genuine, go the second mile, **love** and involvement with others...

It is absolutely essential that our relationships are real, in which we can be transparent and vulnerable.

Australians have a very sensitive meter that measures genuineness. They will not trust what we have to say, unless they can trust us. Unless we are consistent.

Finally they will not listen to what I have to say, unless I have first listened to them. And listened. And listened!

And in listening – taken them seriously. Listening to understand.

When eventually this wins you the right to be heard – your own story of how being a friend of Jesus makes a difference, becomes a very powerful tool.

That and the willingness to ask questions instead of giving answers.

To keep the conversation going, to be non-critical, to be genuinely interested while occasionally taking the risk to ask a probing question...

These, I believe, are your two greatest tools if you want to help those you know – begin to consider a journey toward Jesus.

Paul wrote:

*So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.*

In sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus with others

It is not only saying the right words – but giving our very selves - that is required!

On your seats are a description of someone I knew.

Perhaps a bit like someone you know.

With it there are some questions.

In a moment I want you to take some time to read about the person, describe them to a neighbour and then seek to answer the question together.

This is about Crossing the street so we can helpfully communicate the gospel to others?

Each of these, are people for whom Christ died.

Each of these individuals need Jesus – even if they don’t know it.

And for each of these the gospel is good news

But how is it good news and how can we share in a way that connects?

ACTIVITY – 10min (Comment for those on line)

PRAYER

Jill is in her 60’s. With little background in the Church she has probably never read the Bible or knows much about what it teaches, but Jill is angry with God.

There have been things in her life that she thinks are unfair, and at the moment she has significant fears and is going through a very difficult time.

It is hard to know why she believes it is God’s fault – but it would appear that for her – if God exists – then he should have stopped them happening or at least fixed it when it began to all go wrong.

Jill would probably tick ‘Christian’ in the religion box of the census. She doesn’t fit any of the other options - and as she probably believes in God and thinks she should go to heaven - then she must be!

Jill has no real problem with the Church. I think she has been a couple of times to a variety of Churches, but doesn’t see the need for it herself.

When talking about these things, Jill said: “I don’t understand why you have to go to Church and be better than others to get to heaven. Surely you can believe in God without all that.”

Sin, and not meeting God’s standards would never cross her mind.

What would it mean to cross the street for Jill. How is the Gospel of the Kingdom Good news for Jill?

Aiden appears to me to be a typical Australian family man.

He does his Job faithfully, loves to catch up with mates for a drink, is concerned about his kids and involved in their sporting activities.

Aiden tries as best as he can to have a good relationship with his wife.

Often our conversations are around the behaviour of his kids. “It is not like in previous generations” he says “No respect, values are slipping, little drive”.

These themes tend to dominate.

Aiden appears to have no spiritual interest, although he is fascinated that I am so much into Church.

He finds it intriguing that someone like me could be so much into religion and invest his life and family in the way I do.

I think he admires it, but can’t quite understand why anyone would.

I am not sure that God or spirituality enters his thoughts much – except when things I say and do prompt him to wonder.

Early on he made it clear he was not interested. But occasionally he brings it up.

Aiden has mentioned that he should come to Church with us sometime, but I think that is more out of cultural curiosity than any interest in joining or taking on our beliefs.

Aiden believes the world is heading downhill and fear is a big part of what he feels – but it still doesn’t appear to cause him to have an active searching after God.

Perhaps he still hopes that somehow mankind will find the answer themselves.

Does Jesus have anything to offer Aiden? What questions could you ask or statements could you make that might cause him to think about faith for himself?

Dean is doing ok in life. He has a growing business and is a bit of an entrepreneur who is always on the move. He doesn’t expect to ever become really rich, but certainly would like to be comfortable.

He is relatively happily married with one teenager at home.

He has a number of long term friends. Dean is social, usually good company and willing to help anyone who genuinely needs it.

He gives the impression of being satisfied and needing nothing.

Dean has had little background in the Church. But he likes to talk about spiritual things and thinks Jesus is ok and said some interesting stuff – even occasionally quoting him – wrongly!

It appears to me there is no consistency or pattern in the topics he raises.

Other than occasionally reflecting on his mortality it is difficult to know what causes his interest.

My guess is – despite his apparent happiness he feels an emptiness, a longing that he can’t put his finger on.

However it would be fair to say, Dean doesn’t perceive his need for God and I think he would find it difficult to ever become a part of Church as his life is already full and his networks sufficient.

Does the gospel have anything to say to Dean? What could you say or do that might help him look a bit deeper into the Christian faith?

Kathy, a woman in her 30’s is very much into spirituality.

She is fascinated, more than that, driven, by a desire to be a whole, well integrated individual whose spiritual experience pervades and influences every other action and decision.

Kathy is highly suspicious of organised religion.

I do not know if that is because of a previous negative experience.

Kathy did admit to me that, until we met, it had never crossed her mind that her spiritual searching could or should include Church.

Kathy and I began a conversation because she was beginning to doubt her own capacity to evaluate the value of the variety of spiritual influences she was touched by and had significant spiritual fears for her child.

Interestingly the Spirit Mind Psychic expo was also not part of her exploration.

I think she believes that her own experiences and capacity to comprehend is sufficient to make sense of it all.

Kathy has an openness to explore Christian truth, and considers herself close to Jesus, but greatly struggles with anything that gives the appearance of an authoritative declaration or approach.

Some common threads I have discovered in listening to Australians I know

1. **Beliefs about Christianity**
   1. There are those for whom ‘Christian’ and ‘Christianity’ are negative words. For them, a Christian is a hypocrite, someone who thinks they are better than the average (tries to be extra good – but isn't really) and attends a Church regularly. Often this would be associated with 'being religious'.
   2. For others 'Christian' is positive word or seen as normative – after all we live in a Christian country! For them ‘believing” in God and being relatively good (do unto others.... ) is what it is all about. Such people are the ones who believe they will get to heaven because they believe in God and are relatively good people. They would probably tick 'Christian' in a survey.
2. **Attitude towards organized religion/Church**

Here there is variety of attitudes but it tends to be one or more of the following 3:

* 1. Suspicion. Dan Browne capitalises on this to make his books so popular. And the media loves to tap into this sentiment. Church and religion are bad: The opiate of the people, corrupt, untruthful, constricting, anti-intellectual, abusive.
  2. Irrelevant or Quaint. Out of touch and unnecessary. A cultural oddity. Interesting – just like archaeology, a museum, an art gallery or ballet! But certainly not for me.
  3. Useful but! For some there is acknowledgement that Church has its place. This can be seen in attitude towards the Salvation Army. But they would also tend to believe that what it achieves could just as well occur by some other non-religious institution.

1. **Attitudes towards Spirituality/God**
   1. Individual/private

Some feel that Religion, what I think about God is my business. 'As far as I am aware, we are on good terms so don't talk to me about it.' And if you want to be fanatical – that is ok, just make sure it doesn't get in my space.

* 1. Self help, personal improvement, new age

Others consider Spirituality and religion not about 'God' - as we would understand him, but about reaching 'my fullest potential'. To achieve this they pursue anything that is thought to work – natural therapies and new age practices, snippets from whichever religion they fancy, even attending a Church can be part of such improvement. But in the midst of this there is usually a genuine searching and commitment to being fulfilled, integrated and spiritual.

* 1. Not on agenda

It would appear, that for some, Spiritual things are not on their agenda at all. Often because they are immersed in something else – career, family, sport - these things have become their God. Times of significant transition or disappointment are a real opportunity to help such people consider Jesus.

For others they have given up or just can't be bothered. Perhaps out of previous disillusionment, or a life time of ignorance. Perhaps it is because they feel they have searched it out and found it wanting!

For others there is active antagonism. Rarely in my experience does this mean it is actually not on their agenda – but at least that is what they will tell you.

1. **Attitudes/belief about Jesus**

It seems to me here is perhaps our greatest opportunity. I believe most Australians will find Jesus both winsome and inspirational. The trouble is their understanding is severely inadequate. As a consequence they either see him as just:

* 1. A Good man who said and did some inspiring and remarkable things

These people like what they know. And often think they understand who he was and what he did. But most have never read a word he said! If they did it was in Sunday School or a quotation in some other literature.

* 1. For others there is just plain ignorance. No knowledge whatsoever. This is becoming increasingly the case as few have any exposure to the Christian story or background in Church.

What I have said so far is, of course, just the tip of the ice berg.

* We could talk about people's belief about sin, heaven, hell and evil.
* We could talk about the lack of but growing need for community and that almost everyone seems to have fear just lurking below the surface.
* We could speak of their failure to believe in absolute truth, yet their rigid believe in the need for Justice.
* And we could reflect on the various different cultural groups within our country that would see all of this differently.