

Conversations that connect

Readings: Luke 18:35-43; 10:25-28; 20:20-26

As I prepared this sermon, I thought “Why am I speaking on this subject?” I actually don’t have much in the way of qualifications in the conversation skills department. I am an introvert and don’t find conversation easy, although I am better now than when I was younger, when I was very self-conscious. Even today, all too often I say the wrong thing, or the right thing but at the wrong time, or in the wrong way, or any combination of the above. Alternatively, I fail to say the words I should because I miss the opportunity in the conversation. The moment passes and then I think of what I should have said and kick myself for not doing so, and beat myself up for days afterwards. So I wonder why I am standing before you at all this morning, except perhaps as C.S. Lewis said, “I am “comparing notes”, not presuming to instruct”. Lewis’ comment emphasizes the fact that we are all learners, we all have L plates on, we’re all on a journey so let’s look at some things that might help us all to be more effective.

Susan spoke to us last week about stepping out, particularly in talking to others about our Christian faith.

This week we will look at the power of questions and their importance in conversation. As a scientist, questions were vitally important to me. In my own case questions like - how does this tree grow and flourish? What happens if I do this or that, how does it influence the way the tree and the fruit develops? How does this rootstock change the way this tree develops? Questions are powerful, they focus our thinking, they can lead us into whole new areas of discovery. I expect some of the students at BTC have found this too, as some of their lecturers have asked them penetrating questions! Questions can cause us to doubt our current understanding and so lead us on a quest for fresh insight or, in other cases, after further research, can result in reinforcing and strengthening our understanding.

Susan also told us last week about the Hope Project, one of the ways in which the church is celebrating the bi-centenary of the coming of the gospel to New Zealand. One of the prime movers in the Hope Project is a passionate guy called Dave Mann. He came through Richmond a few months ago to outline the Hope Project. At heart he’s an evangelist but he is also very aware of the changes in our culture and how our approach to witnessing should respond. Basically evangelism wants to bring the unchanging message of God’s love and salvation to all people, but the way that we do it has to be culturally appropriate. His book “Because we care” encapsulates his thinking, I would recommend you read it, it’s not heavy stuff. Unfortunately it is not available through Manna Bookshops, but is available post-free from Big Book Publishing in Tauranga.

I presume everyone here believes in God, that He created the universe, that we are not here by chance; that God has revealed His truth in the Bible and in Jesus,

who was born, lived, died and rose again, as our Saviour and Lord, and that He will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

However, I cannot presume that any stranger I meet believes all or **any** of these cardinal truths of the Christian faith, or, if he believes them, attaches the same meaning to the words that I do. We live in a pluralist society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs or none. The Book of Judges ends with those sad words “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25 AV), something our own age knows all too well.

Sometimes people come to us with direct questions about our faith, like “How do I become a Christian?”, but I find that rare these days, more often than not they have no interest, they are indifferent to the gospel or even antagonistic to the Christian religion. As George Ling says, for many people, “Church is what some others do. It is noticed sadly, in their terms, as an alien and expensive building that they wouldn’t know what to do in, worse, it is occupied by people they wouldn’t be seen dead with.” Today for many people truth is relative, there is no absolute truth, so if we seek to argue the Christian truth as we believe it to be, it isn’t going to work because to them it is merely **our version** of the truth. It might work for us but it doesn’t work for them, indeed they might be offended if we are too pushy with our beliefs. Where then do we start?

One of the big problems in our day is that of loneliness; people are assaulted by voices from the TV, the radio, the phone, when they are shopping, all trying to get their attention but this is not conversation. Conversation is two way, it involves listening as well as speaking. One of the ways we can show love to people is actually to listen to them and to prompt them with questions to really understand where they’re at; and perhaps to get them to question their own perceptions of truth for themselves. It also gives us an opportunity to listen to the Spirit of God as they speak to us, to hear what God is saying to them. “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Prov. 18:13). Some people don’t tell you what they really think because they don’t trust you, they fob you off with generalities but graciously asking genuine questions can assure them that you really do care. Again for others, they actually don’t really know what they feel or believe, but the opportunity to lovingly explore their beliefs can be of great help to them. As Dave Mann says “People are not offended when we ask sincere questions,There is thus a way to non-offensively cause those we love to reevaluate some of their beliefs and assumptions.” ... So conversation which involves question asking may be particularly suited to our day and age. One of the most amazing statistics I heard of recently was that people remember only about 10% of what they are told but about 40% of what they say, so what they respond to our questions with, is important.

Jesus like all good rabbis, knew the power of questions. He was a master at asking questions. We had three examples from the readings this morning. The first one was the blind beggar sitting by the roadside near Jericho. Interestingly

the beggar was shouting for mercy from Jesus, but Jesus goes right to the nub of things, “What do you want me to do for you”, he asks. The beggar now had to be concrete with his request, so he answered “Lord, let me recover my sight”. And Jesus commanded the healing. (Luke 18:35-42).

The second reading was the preamble to Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer came up to try and trick Jesus with the question “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus wants to know what the man himself really thinks, so He asks him a question “What is written in the law? How do **you** read it?” The lawyer replies by correctly quoting the law “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” (Deut. 6:5 & Lev. 19:18). Jesus commends him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” Then the lawyer is still probing when he says “And who is my neighbour?” Then Jesus goes on to tell the shocking story, to the lawyer, of the Good Samaritan. The story ends with Jesus asking the lawyer “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” (Luke 10:25-37).

The third reading covers another testing of Jesus by the agents of the scribes and chief priests with their question “Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?” Jesus responds again with questions of his own “Show me a coin” and “Whose likeness and inscription does the coin have?” In asking them to get a coin, He disarmed the knife edge situation, for if they used Caesar’s currency they were bound to pay Caesar’s tax (Luke 20:20-26).

In each case Jesus is asking questions to clarify the questioner’s beliefs, and giving us a very clear example to follow. In Jesus’ case, of course, He already knew where his questioners’ hearts were, so the purpose of the question was to get them to verbalise what they really believed, so both they and the listeners understood what they meant. One of the classic examples is Jesus on the Emmaus road, where he meets the two dispirited disciples, and he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them, “What things?” (Luke 24:17-19). He gently got them to verbalise their thinking and their pain. So Jesus rarely gave a direct answer to those who came to Him, He frequently asked them a question. Indeed His conversation starter to the woman at the well was a question, to ask for a drink (John 4:5-26).

In our society, if people feel we have an agenda, and we are like a salesman trying to convince them of their need for Jesus, they will be on their guard, indeed they might close the conversation down very quickly. As Dave Mann says “Aggressive approaches close doors today. We may need to become good conversationalists if we are to be effective witnesses to those we love.” I think he is right and one of the key tools in conversation is the asking of questions.

Questions open up a conversation, dogmatic statements can shut conversation down.

Questions to clarify **what** they mean,
 questions to clarify **why** they have come to that conclusion and even
 questions to suggest an alternative viewpoint e.g. “Have you considered...”.

So perhaps to the comment “The Bible is unreliable”, our response might be, “That’s an interesting observation, what makes you say that?”, rather than saying “That’s rubbish, don’t you know that the Bible is the most reliable ancient document in existence?” and immediately the battle lines are drawn or the other person just walks away. The object is not to win the argument, it is to initiate a conversation, to give them space.

A few months ago I read a book by Rosario Champagne Butterfield entitled “The secret thoughts of an unlikely convert” (Crown & Covenant) and I want to tell you something about her story because it illustrates so well what we are talking about this morning.

At the age of 36, having done a PhD in English Literature and Cultural Studies, Rosario was a tenured Professor at a large research university in the North Eastern USA, where she held a teaching appointment in the Centre for Women’s Studies. She was a lesbian activist and in a lesbian relationship with a woman professor from a neighboring university. She was heavily involved in the local gay community and invited by major universities to lecture on gay and lesbian studies. Her research work, at the time, involved a study of the rise of the Religious Right in America and what was the cause of the hatred that the Religious Right used against gays and lesbians, people like her. She realized she had to read the Bible to try and understand where the Religious Right got their ideas from, indeed she even started a self-study of Greek to help her understand the New Testament.

She had an article published in the local newspaper critiquing Promise Keepers for their gender politics, which resulted in many letters - either hate mail and fan mail. She filed them in separate boxes on her desk. She also received one letter that didn’t fit either category; it was from a local Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. This is what she said about the letter. “It was a kind and enquiring letter. It encouraged me to explore the kind of questions I admire: how did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? Do you believe in God? He didn’t argue with my article; he asked me to explore and defend the presuppositions that undergirded it. The letter invited me to call its author to discuss these ideas more fully. It was the kindest letter of opposition that I had ever received. After a week, I called.” During the phone call the pastor invited her to dinner at his house to explore some of these questions, indeed he even offered to meet her at a restaurant if she was afraid to come to a stranger’s home.

She went to dinner with the pastor and his wife in their home. This is what she said of the pastor and his wife “They listened to me and identified with Christ. They were willing to walk the long journey to me in Christian compassion. During our meal they did not share the gospel with me. After our meal they did not invite me to church. Because of these glaring omissions to the Christian script as I had come to know it, when the evening ended and the pastor said he wanted to keep in touch. I knew that it was truly safe to accept his open hand.” Many meetings followed over the next two years or so and in many of them the pastor continued to gently ask her questions. She eventually became a Christian, as she says “I prayed that if Jesus was truly a real and risen God, that he would change my heart. And if he was real and if I was his, I prayed that he would give me the strength of mind to follow him and the character to become a godly woman. I prayed for strength of character to repent for a sin that at that time didn’t feel like sin at all – it felt like life, plain and simple. I prayed that if my life was actually his life that he would take it back and make it what he wanted it to be. I asked him to take it all: my sexuality, my profession, my community, my tastes, my books and my tomorrows.” She gave up her lesbian lifestyle and some years later married a godly Christian man.

Her story is a very powerful one, partly because she is now such a passionate disciple of Jesus. She is a Christian today because someone was prepared to ask her questions, not hit her over the head with the gospel or with condemnation, but gently question her presuppositions. Her story is a wonderful example of what we are talking about this morning – the power of questions.

May God help us to learn the art of conversation, particularly the use of questions, and then the ability to listen to both those we are conversing with and to the Spirit of God.