

Theme: **Knowing when to step out**

Readings: 1 Samuel 14:1 – 17, 20 – 23, Matthew 28:18 - 20

We are often banging on about how we are all witnesses for Christ aren't we? I wonder who finds that emphasis to be a helpful challenge. I wonder who finds it intimidating or guilt inducing. I wonder what is stirred up in you when you are face to face with a situation where you don't know whether to say something about your own faith or whether to keep it zipped and say nothing in case you offend.

If you are anything like me, you will face those dilemmas quite often. Then comes a rush of mixed feelings – fear and hopefully excitement. But what to do? Hmmmm – step out or say nothing, step out or say nothing?

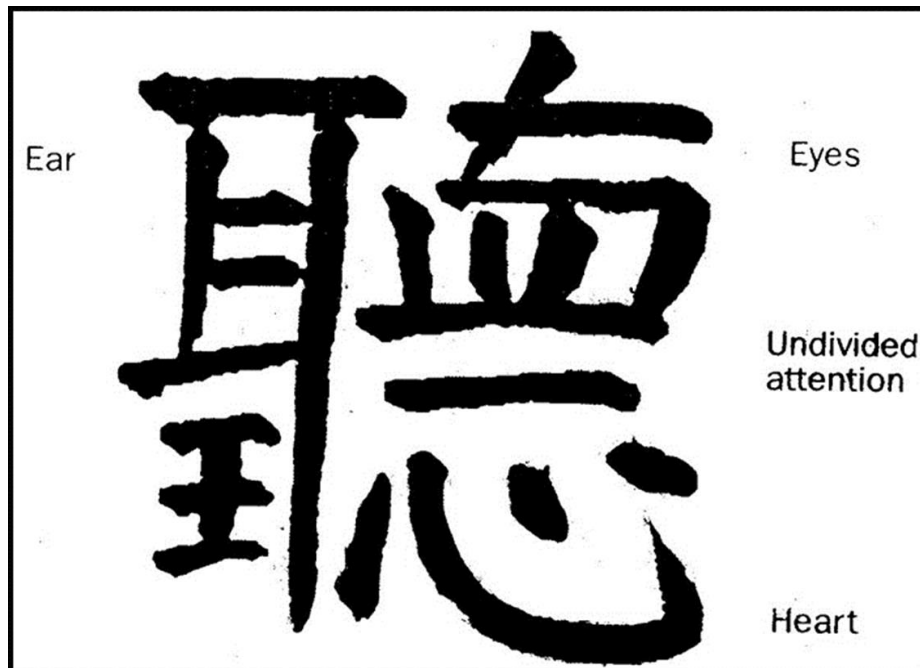
In 1974, I was at a party, when a girlfriend asked me if I wanted to go outside and smoke a cigarette with her. I was a new Christian at the time and I knew smoking wasn't really a good idea but I went and smoked a cigarette with her anyway. You see my friend had been asking some questions about my new found faith in Jesus. The smoking probably wasn't the right thing to do but the conversation was amazing. We spent a long time talking about what it meant to follow Jesus.

I had little idea about what it meant to be a Christian having decided to follow Jesus only a few months beforehand. I had given up smoking a while back and shouldn't have given in to temptation. In spite of those things, the Lord used the conversation we had that night to plant a seed deep within my friend. That seed would sprout and grow due to the input of others. Eventually she gave her own life to the Lord and, as far as I know, is still going on with him.

Interesting isn't it? The Lord didn't need my perfection. He didn't need my knowledge or my eloquent words or even my morality. All he needed was me to be willing to step out with my friend and talk with her as best I knew how.

It seems to me we overthink sharing our Christian faith. We try to plan ahead or we avoid it like the plague. But sharing doesn't have to be hard – especially when the Holy Spirit has already prepared the other person. All we really have to do is to care for others and listen with an open heart and mind for indications of interest. The Holy Spirit is at work in the world. Sometimes we know people so well. Often we think we know their hearts and what they are thinking and how they will act. But actually the Spirit is at work in them more than we know. We can't always make presumptions just because they seemed closed the last time we mentioned spiritual things.

We must listen to the Holy Spirit and to the person with an open posture of heart. Some of us have recently been part of the Budget Advice Training Anne has so capably organised for us. Part of that training entails listening. Listening is not something that happens automatically. The Chinese character for listening is very helpful here.



When we listen to the Lord with our ears, eyes, undivided attention and our hearts, we will discover the opportunities there are to share our faith. When we listen to other people the same way we will often find opportunities to step out in love. When we get an opportunity, that is the time to step out with boldness and sensitivity to share who and what we know. When we do that, God will honour our conversation and continue to work in the person's life.

Let's take a look at our first reading:

Saul finds himself outnumbered and ill equipped to fight a battle.

- Earlier he had sent some of his own army home. Other soldiers had defected to the Philistines or simply chickened out and fled.
- The remaining soldiers do not have enough weapons to fight with. (Read about the reasons for that at the end of chapter 13.)
- Add to that the Philistines are really fired up because Saul killed their governor earlier. They have amassed a huge army ready to annihilate the Israelites.
- Also the prophet Samuel, who Saul relied on to tell him God's plans, has shot through. (You can read about that earlier in chapter 13.) So there is no Samuel to call on the Lord and booster Saul's courage

Saul finds himself facing a huge army with meagre resources, no Samuel, no way out and he does a bit of a freak-out. Too many Philistines; too few Israelites.

What to do when you don't know what to do? Hmmmm Put it all on the backburner. Time out everyone. Let's make camp. That is exactly what Saul does. There is a large patrol of Philistines in their camp nearby at Michmash pass.

So now there is an impasse – get it Michmach pass > impasse! Anyway, Saul and his army are frozen into inaction.

But – ta da – Saul’s son Jonathan is ready to step out and try something. “Come on now let’s go across to the uncircumcised pagans. Maybe God will work for us. there’s no rule that says God can only deliver by using a big army. No one can stop God from saving when he sets his mind to it.”¹

The armour bearer joins Jonathan in their quest. Jonathan asks God for a sign. We’ll cross over the pass and show ourselves to the Philistines. If they invite us up, then up we’ll go. We will take that as God being on our side.

That is what happened. Jonathan and the armour bearer scramble up, confuse the few soldiers who are on lookout duty and rout the enemy. The scene is probably like something out of an action movie. Biff, pow, smack. A few Philistines get their beans and the rest are thrown into panic.

All because Jonathan knew when to step out and take a risk. Notice though it was a calculated risk.

1. He got someone else on board – the armour bearer.
2. Then he tested the waters to see if God would bless them. If God had not blessed them, he would have stepped back before getting into serious trouble.

God did bless them.

Now it gets even more interesting. Saul’s sentries see or hear the commotion. He and his men dived into the fray. Defectors from the Israelite army swapped sides again and turned on the Philistines. Some who had been hiding also joined in. The biffing and powing and smacking continued.

God saved Israel that day – all because Jonathan refused to be cowed by the strength of the Philistine army. He thought outside the square. He took someone with him. He asked God for a sign. He checked to see that God had authorised what he was to do, then he stepped out. He was probably afraid but he stepped out in the authority that God had given him and he acted courageously anyway.

Last week we talked about the authority that Christ has. We talked about the authority we have been given through him; the authority he delegates to us. We touched on the Great Commission which is the authorisation we have to share our faith with others. That authorisation comes from Jesus Christ himself!

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

¹ 1 Samuel 14:6 The Message

We don't really need to ask for a sign like Jonathan did though we must be sensitive and not be Bible bashers. Jesus has told us to go and we must not take his words lightly, regardless of how terrified they make us feel.

Next month there is a big evangelism campaign as part of celebrating the 200th year of the Gospel coming to Aotearoa NZ. Our church has contributed financially and prayerfully to be part of this project. It is called the Hope Project and I'll show you a brief clip in a moment.

This project is a God given opportunity to talk to people about Jesus. We won't have to do really scary stuff. All we have to do is watch the ads on TV around that time, and be alert for opportunities to talk to our neighbours about the ad and the booklet they will receive in their letter boxes. We might simply say something like "Did you get a booklet in your letter box? What did you think about it?"

When my eldest daughter was five, she asked me how babies were made. Pause for Mum to freak out and get my breath. Then I answered simply saying something like two eggs join together to make a baby. "Where do the eggs come from? How do they get together?" She kept on asking questions. I answered each question one at a time, talking simply, thinking she would be satisfied with that. To my very great surprise she kept on asking questions until I told her the whole story. (You may not think this wise – I did tell her that this was a talk we only had in our family. She honoured that and over time she forgot our conversation and needed the information again when she was much older.)

Forget the specifics of the topic Rachael and I discussed; my point is that often people are much more open than we give them credit for. Often they want to know and experience more than we think they do. That is true spiritually as in any other area. Some people you know are probably waiting for you to talk honestly and openly with them about your faith in Christ and about what that means to you. Worst comes to the worst, you get a knock back. Big deal. That won't be fatal.

What I am asking you to do before the Hope Project is launched mid-October, is to pray for people you know and love. Perhaps you might pick one or two people to concentrate your prayers on at this time. Maybe you'll write their names on a card to carry around as a prayer reminder.

And listen to the Lord and to the ones you are praying for. If an opportunity comes up, then step out, take a risk and see what God does.