

ROMANS 10:14-17  
A MESSAGE TRIBE

Why do we have sermons? Why do we have a preacher who speaks for 20 minutes and we have to listen without the chance to challenge or interrupt or ask questions? The Church must be almost the last place in our society where this kind of thing happens. Why does the Church still think that preaching is an important skill for its leaders? Some are better than others, but we still do it. Why? Preaching has always been part of Church life; though it has changed! If you had been attending Church in Scotland 200 years ago, you would have 'enjoyed' a service that lasted nearly 2 hours and in that 2 hours there would have been 3 psalms to sing, 2 quite long prayers, a Bible reading with a half-hour explanation of what that Bible passage meant and then a 40-minute sermon on how to live the Christian life. Now we are shorter, use technology and pretty pictures, even cartoons, and different styles, but we still preach sermons in Church.

The reason for sermons is that we are 'a message tribe!' You might not understand the phrase too easily, but it simply means that we are a people with a message to share; we have a story to tell. The Church's mission is to pass on good news to others and God has had a habit of calling people to stand up in public and pass on that good news by preaching sermons. The preacher is not here as someone who knows all the answers; it is more like "one blind man telling other blind people where to find food", people called by God to open up and explain the meaning of the Bible so that we can all learn to believe and to live by faith. The Church has always believed that it is important to hear the good news and so, in one way or another, the Church still has the responsibility to tell the Christian story.

God is on His mission to bless the world. We have said in the last few weeks that the Church is sent by Jesus in the same way as Jesus was sent by God into the world. We are sent to be in the world, to live in the real world, to listen to people, finding out what excites them, what disturbs them, and what they think about God and faith. We also said that we are sent to serve the world in all kinds of appropriate ways. Last week, we said that the heart of that mission in the world is to make disciples, to draw people to Christ and then to help people become like Christ in way that we live. This is not just about getting people into Churches but is about people coming to faith in Jesus and then living out that faith in the day-to-day world of work, families, relationships, etc. As Church we are called to be disciples and to make disciples; as Christians we are called to be disciples and to make disciples.

The way that God has given to the Church by which we make disciples is sharing a message of good news with others. "Almost any starting point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance and faith and obedience has not completed its task." (C.J. Wright *The Mission of God* p.319) Perhaps you saw Billy Graham on *Songs of Praise* last Sunday; he is arguably the most famous preacher of the last 50 years, and the programme was remembering some of *Mission England* 25 years ago; maybe the strategy of stadium tours for evangelists is a thing of the past now. It may be that we need to rethink even the 20 minute monologue from the pulpit as an effective communication strategy for the future! However, in some way or another, the Church will always be in the business of sharing a message with others so that others come to know Christ and come to faith. We are sent to be in the world, to serve the world and ultimately to share a message with the people we meet.

In Romans chapter 10 Paul tells us how it works. He knows that the gospel is for everyone and that everyone who calls on God through Jesus will be saved. That gospel is for everyone, no matter who they are; the blessings and benefits of Jesus are for all who come to faith, no matter who they are. But then a question: “*how can...*” (10:14) How can people call on God unless they believe? We find the blessing of God on our lives through faith. How can people believe if they don't know? “*And how...*” (10:14b) Lets turn that round: God calls people to preach good news, to share a message; we tell people about Jesus; people hear the good news and as result of hearing, come to faith and because they come to faith, they find God's blessing of grace, peace, forgiveness, and love. At the heart of this process is a message which people hear and to which people respond.

If you were to read Paul's life-story and the history of the Church in book of Acts, you will see that everywhere Paul went on his travels, he found opportunities to tell people about Jesus. He did it in all sorts of ways: to Jewish audiences, he began by telling them that Jesus was the fulfilment of all that had gone before, that the stories of Abraham, Moses, and David, were fulfilled and completed in Jesus. To an audience of Greeks in Athens who loved to discuss and debate new ideas, he began with their poets and their philosophy to then go on to explain that Jesus is the heart of human life. Paul did other things, he spent his time in other ways, but this is his main focus, telling others about Jesus, as he said late in life “*this grace...*” (Eph 3:8)

Some of you have been through the *Lost for Words* course. We last did it a few years ago and it might be good idea to repeat it at some stage. The whole point of that course is to help us speak about our faith to other people. It is not about Bible-bashing, not pushing something down other people's throats, not forcing people into Church against their will, but it is about sharing what we believe with people we know, quite naturally and unashamedly when opportunities arise. One part of course asks: how would you explain the Christian story in just a few minutes? What things would be important? How would you explain what is important to you about your faith? Perhaps there is a natural Scottish reserve about these things, talking about personal beliefs and values, but this is a challenge for the whole Church, to be ready, willing, able, and courageous to share what we know with others. How will people believe unless they hear and they will not always come into Churches to hear; that hearing now needs to take place in staff-rooms, living rooms, and across garden fences as we share Christian message with others.

Alan Hirsch suggests that gospel should be ‘sneezable’. We pass on viruses by sneezing and it happens quite simply, almost imperceptibly. Why can't we pass on the gospel in the same kind of way? One person shares something simple about the Christian faith with a friend, quite naturally passing on something about Jesus during the course of an ordinary conversation and then that gets passed on to someone else and someone else through the complex network of our relationships and so the message is passed on through the community like a sneeze! We are not all called to be preachers, but every Christian is challenged to be able to share something of the Christian message with other people in simple, natural, unashamed ways. Lots of people will never come into Church to hear sermons nowadays; but lots of people come into contact every day with us; how can they hear? Only if we tell them.

The Parable of the sower is all about sharing a message. Jesus told the story about His own ministry and Billy Graham used it about his ministry; it is true every time the story is told by a preacher or across the garden fence. The Word is scattered like seed on the ground: it falls on four places. It falls on the path and the path is rock hard, so the birds come and eat it, as it just sits on the surface; it falls among the heap of stones at the side of the field and there is only a little soil there, so the plant

has no depth and though it begins to grow, it dies when the sun scorches it; the seed falls among the weeds and thorns and these grow more strongly and choke out the growing plant; it falls on good soil and begins to grow and it grows strongly and produces fruit. For some, the story will fall on deaf ears, they won't hear and it will make absolutely no impression on them; for others it will make a little mark, but life becomes hard and any emerging faith is lost amongst the troubles of life; for others the story will make an impression and they begin to believe, but that new faith gets choked out by the worries of life, by wealth, or other things become more important. There will be some who hear and the story changes their lives: they come to believe in Jesus and faith takes a real root in their hearts and they begin to live by the values that Jesus teaches; faith becomes the key to way they live.

We never know how people will react to story. That is wonder of being a preacher. I am constantly taken by surprise at the way in which people react to sermons I preach in Church or elsewhere, reactions that I could never have predicted. The Spirit of God is at work in people's hearts to help us listen and take in what we hear. We will never know how people will react to the message we share: some will ignore it, some will hate it, but some will love it and for some it will be the turning-point of their lives. Something that we say might just become the seed planted in their hearts that one day will bear fruit in a life-changing faith. All of us are here today because someone else told us about Jesus: it might have been a preacher, but more likely it was a family member or a friend who shared with us something important. We can do that for others.

How can we be 'a message tribe' in our community? Well, I will continue to preach sermons and open up the good news of Jesus for us all to hear; I will be as creative and imaginative as I can be in doing that, but the heart of it is good news of Jesus. We can sneeze the gospel, sharing something simple that we know and believe in conversations with others, listening to what excites or disturbs people and sharing something of our faith. We need to pray that God will give us these opportunities; pray for wisdom to know what to say when these opportunities arise and pray for courage to take these opportunities. How will people come to faith in Jesus in 2009? In same way they have always done, by hearing a message, by hearing good news. How will they hear? In same way they have always heard, by someone telling them! Some will ignore the message, some will hate it, but for some it will be the word of life, a message that opens up a whole new view of life, a whole new panorama of blessing from God, a whole new faith. *"How beautiful..." (Romans 10:15)*