

Person Centred Church – Person Centred Evangelism

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 / Mark 1:14-18

The Broadside Evangelist

Where I used to live in Forest Hill, there was a bit where the South Circular cuts through. The road was wide and it was very noisy. On one side there was a disused cinema and a great big pavement, while on the other it was rather narrow. Naturally, 90% of people walked on the narrow side – that was the route up McDonald's, Sainsbury's, the opticians, and so on. And on the broad side, in a biblical kind of way, most Saturday mornings, stood the evangelist. He was in his 40s or 50s, dressed like an ordinary working man – I later found he worked for a ventilation plant company, which could be seen as appropriate considering the ventilation he exercised in the street. He held aloft in one hand, a pocket new testament which could barely be seen. And he shouted, through the traffic, to the people on the other side of the road. No-one could hear him, and surely he must have known that, all they could tell was that he was shouting at them – or someone. Meanwhile, the few people who did walk on that broad side of the road, used it to give him a wide berth.

Why did he do it? I talked with him once at the counter of his sales office. He seemed a nice chap, though dogged by an inner fibre of sadness. From what I could tell, although he didn't say this himself, there were three reasons:

1. he was fulfilling the Lord's commission to preach the gospel to all nations;
2. the fact that people just kept walking by was proof that the world does not accept the gospel and therefore no cause for concern, but rather a justification of the truth of what he was doing;
3. in preaching to all nations he was hastening on the Lord's return, at which the world would be judged and he, if he was obedient and faithful to the end, might be saved.

Now evangelism is supposed to be the announcement of good news, but this didn't seem such good news to me. I don't want to poke fun at this man or disrespect the earnestness of his faith – the question I want to raise is the agenda behind our evangelism. I've been on missions many times when before going out onto the street, the beach, the doors, the market, we would pray about the spiritual battle raging all around. Little wonder that we addressed people as if we were in mortal combat with them.

Other times I've preached a perfectly encapsulated exposition of the gospel and the cross and puzzled afterwards why no-one came up to me to tell me they'd said the prayer and asked Jesus into their lives. On reflection I realised that I simply wasn't addressing questions they were asking – I had no relationship with them – but it didn't stop me doing it again.

Me and You

Person-Centred evangelism takes almost the opposite approach. It's all about "me and you" "my life and yours" and the sharing of those lives so that naturally I share with you what I do on Sundays, how I pray on Mondays, who I see on Wednesdays, and so on.

Rebecca Manley Pippert was an American student evangelist until her death at the age of 80 last December. 30 years ago she wrote a book called "Out of the Saltshaker" - still relevant and still just about available. She wrote this: *"One thing hindered me from speaking: I felt that unless I gave a person the whole ball of wax, all at one time, then I wasn't "evangelising"... I approached my year in Spain seeking to establish caring relationships with students and asking God to touch their lives. I also asked him to teach me to share my faith and to free me from fear... When the actual moment arrived my fear was so great that it reduced me to a rather catatonic state, and I mumbled, "You don't want to come to a Bible discussion do you?"*

To my amazement and alarm, they all said it was a great idea and they were eager to come... One of the surprises was the kind of people who wanted to come. Without realising I had formed a mental picture of the people God would lead me to. I expected it to be the "likely" ones: those who seemed a bit passive or lonely or vulnerable... Then I met Mary... Without knowing I was a Christian, she said, "This has been the best month I've had all year! Do you know that I've talked three people out of being Christians this month!" "I gulped and thought, "thank goodness I didn't invite her along to the Bible discussion! I would die if someone like that ever came."

Of course you can guess the rest of the story: Mary did find out about the group, she did go along, in fact the following Wednesday she was the *only* one to go along. Rebecca felt highly embarrassed but managed to say something about her faith at the insistent questioning of her caller, and then gave Mary a book to read as she left. "Read it sometime over the next couple of years."

The next week only one person came back to the group: Mary. She'd read the book, and suddenly, part way through another awkward conversation she says: "I feel like God is over there and I am over here. I've really wanted to know God all my life, but how do I bridge the gap? What would I do if I wanted to become a Christian?" ... Pippert writes, *"Just the thought of facing such an episode made me quake."* And she actually ushered out of the door, told her to go home, and read the last chapter of the book. (*Out of the Saltshaker, pp.17-20*)

As it happened though, Mary did become a Christian and they became friends. And I love that story because it illustrates so well the transition from programme evangelism based on guilt, fear, and pre-packaged assumptions, to evangelism that is person-centred, often stumbling, but real, relational evangelism.

Regarding Others

When St Paul wrote his Second Letter to the Corinthians he was deeply and painfully estranged from them, and indeed from himself. Not surprisingly, perhaps, he found himself drawn to the theme of reconciliation:

He said, **“From now on, we regard no-one from a worldly point of view... [but] God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors...”** (2 Cor. 5:16-20)

“From now on...” When we regard people from a worldly point of view we think of them as clever, stupid, powerful, weak, vulnerable, defended, pleasant, aggressive, suitable to become a Christian, unsuitable to become a Christian, and so on. In my class at school there was one Christian. He looked around to see who he could invite to church. None of the people he thought as likely candidates ever came. They were nice and he got along with them, but they were never the ones who responded spiritually. When I became a Christian, he later told me “You were the last person I would have thought of.” But Paul says he resolved simply to see everyone as a person made by God, loved by God, and reachable by God.

Your Own Words

Person-centred evangelism starts with us as ordinary people having our lives changed by a wonderful God. It continues with us relating to others as ordinary people, sharing what's been happening in our lives, what goes on at church - this “Christian thing”. It opens up the possibility of those other ordinary people also having their lives touched and changed by this wonderful God – it may happen through our church here, and they may even join us.

So person-centred evangelism is all about “your own words”. Many years ago I wanted to work for John Lewis, so I went along to a special day they had for new recruits. Just about the only thing I can remember is that they prided themselves on never advertising, except when they were opening a new store. Their policy has slightly changed now. But back in 1980 they were insistent on building their reputation purely by word of mouth. Your own words – nobody says them better than you.

The Source of Person-Centred Evangelism

Let's go a bit deeper to the source of person-centred evangelism.

One thing I've been emphasising throughout this series is the idea of the church as “an organic extension of the Trinity”. We are person-centred because God from eternity is person-centred. So as we think about evangelism or as we consider what it means to join with God in his mission, we need to reflect once again on what kind of Trinity we encounter in this God.

Mon-Arch-ical Trinity?

I've said before that we might think of Trinity as a Monarchical Procession. A monarch literally means “one head” so if we think of Trinity in terms of Monarchical Procession it means that God the Father is the Supreme Head God; he sends Jesus out to do his work, and Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to do his work. It's a hierarchical view, an autocratic view, a dictatorial view. The direction is one-way.

Although this view of Trinity was never the official view of Christian theology, it was effectively the view the church worked with for centuries. It was reflected in, and reflective of, a society in which the king or Emperor was the Mon-arch – the “one head”. Christian teaching, by and large, was handed out in preformed packages from on high, and Christian mission was the dictation of one culture to another. Evangelism done from this standpoint will always be prescriptive: “you must become a Christian in the way I tell you to – by saying *this* prayer, doing *these* things, accepting *my* message.” It’s all “tell, tell, tell”!

McDonaldisation

This view of God leads to what John Drane called “the McDonaldisation of the church.” In other words, one size fits (or has to fit) all, one product, packaged in one way, franchise evangelism, one prayer of commitment, one set of questions, one gospel framework, one doorway to faith. But that’s neither a manner that reflects God, nor a method that cuts ice with our world. The Trinity *isn’t* Big Father pushing Medium-sized Son, pushing Willowy Spirit, and our world, more than ever before, hungers for attention to the diversity of each individual human spirit.

The Trinitarian Dance

Well, it’s not surprising that from within a culture where authority and dogmatism has been severely tested and questioned, the most wonderful insights on Trinity have also arising. Nowadays we see the Trinity’s three persons in an equal dance of mutuality – inviting, serving, sharing, celebrating individuality and together creating community. *That* kind of God lives a person-centred model of mission – has always been, and will always be reaching out. So it’s totally consistent that this God wants us to be involved and included in his/her outreach mission.

This is the God, with personality and diversity in his soul, and who creates personality and diversity. In this church today we’re a group of people with diverse personalities, and we’re just a tiny sample of the whole world. And all this springs from the diversity and personality in God’s own being: not hierarchy but mutuality; not command but service; not judgement but delight; not refusal but invitation.

Outward-Looking Dialogue

Evangelism from these roots will be not so much “telling” as “talking”; not so much “converting others” but “conversing *with* others”; not so much “inveighing” as “inviting”. The Trinity is a perfect and beautiful equality of relations and such relations are always characterised not by monologue, but dialogue. God is always going out, reaching out, sharing the goodness God has to offer, inviting others into the God-dance and the God-life. All the time, God is on mission. All the time God is calling out, waiting to be found.

Earlier in the week I came across a wonderful verse in 2 Samuel 14:14: **“Like water spilled on the ground we must die. But God does not take away life; instead he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.”** You see, this is what God's like – always going out; always seeking ways to invite us in. The other day someone gave me a postcard with the slogan: *“There probably is a God. Now stop worrying and start looking for him. He is everywhere.”*

This is the source of person-centred evangelism – the fact that our God is person-centred Trinity, seeking personal relationship with all people. And therefore St Paul called himself an **“Ambassador for Christ”** - the personal representative of the one who sent them – being like Christ. Think about Jesus Christ for a moment: In Christ, God so wanted to communicate with us that he became one of us.

Paul said elsewhere that he would **“become all things to all people”** for the sake of the gospel. And person-centred evangelism is all about stepping into the other person's shoes, getting alongside them, relating within their frame of reference rather than from the distance of our own. Now, you may say this is all just pandering to individualism with everyone simply forming their own individualised brand of Christianity that suits them. Surely the gospel makes demands on us and requires change! Surely that's the challenge of evangelism – that we proclaim the Lordship of God and call people to repentance!

Values for Missionary Churches

In 2004, the Church of England produced a report entitled “Mission-Shaped Church” and they identified “five values for missionary churches.” They said, *“a missionary church is focused on God the Trinity, is incarnational, (in other words it enters the lives of those it would communicate with) is transformational (it looks for individual and community change) makes disciples, and is relational.”* (Mission-Shaped Church, p.81-82). These might seem as if they follow on from one another logically, but I see these elements lined up like folds in a concertina: At one end is the Trinity: our foundation in a person-centred God. At the other is “relational” - our commitment to make mission person-centred. Next on the left, we have “incarnational” - God becoming human; the church communicating in the culture of others. Next in on the right, we have “discipleship” because whenever a person becomes a Christian they also have to move – repentance and faith. And the result of that is in the middle: “Transformation” - the individual and of society.

Can you see the pattern? Relationship in God – the Trinity – is mirrored at the other end by relationship on the earth, in our mission. Self-giving movement by God and the church through incarnation is mirrored self-giving movement by people responding in discipleship. Self-giving is the natural consequence of good relationship. The result is transformation!

Getting Busy

So how will *you* get busy with person-centred evangelism? How will *you* share *your* faith, not someone else's? Earlier I quoted a story from Rebecca Manley Pippert's *“Out of the Saltshaker”*. After she died, one of the people paying tribute to her said, “the first thing I learnt from her was that God does not require perfection to be able to use us.”

Everyone here can be involved in God's person-to-person mission. Everyone here has a story to tell – about “you and God” - maybe you prefer to say “you and church” - it doesn't matter whether you get the words exactly right, what matters is that it's your story about what this Christian thing has done for you. And everyone here has a person to tell, or several persons to tell, whether it's an unexpected conversation that suddenly appears or one you've been meaning to hold for ages. And you don't have to end it by praying with that other person to receive Christ into their heart – that might be the most ridiculous imposition. But you can say, “I found it at St James' – why don't you come along?” You can suggest meeting them or picking them up. It's all about the possibilities that open up when we talk personally with other persons – like God has always done.

No-one likes “being told”

A bloke called Tim led loads of people to faith in Christ. Someone asked him how he was so successful. He said two words: “Show up.” In other words, be there; connect; talk; share; ask questions; invite. You have already been brought into God's flowing dance. Make sure you keep your hand outstretched to others.

Someone said, “Evangelism entails an invitation to come under God's rule and learn its ways” (Graham Tomlin, *Provocative Church*, p.65) I think that's dangerous talk. Person-Centred evangelism is about how *we* are being healed by God's rule and sharing the invitation for others to join us, so they can find out for themselves.” No-one likes “being told”; people love “being won”.