

## Changing Culture, Changing Values

Acts 11:1-18

11th July 2010

Encounter @ 9

Colin Marsh

The boxer Mohammad Ali was on a flight when the aircraft ran into turbulence and began to shake quite violently. The passengers were told to fasten their seatbelts straightaway, and every complied apart from Ali. When the stewardess saw this, she approached him and asked him to fasten his belt. Ali replied, "Superman don't need no seatbelt!" The stewardess took one look at him and retorted, "Superman don't need no airplane either!" ***A Bundle of Laughs, p. 106***

Do we need God? We seem to get on quite well without him: we can exist, eat, sleep, work, play - do all the things we have in common with other creatures. But what's really keeping us all alive? Not a Boeing 707, but a much greater power – yet most people in this country don't recognise it. Like Mohammad Ali, they see themselves as independent, self-sufficient – even immortal.

Oh yes, we can get along on our own, but without God, we are not really living

- we don't have what Jesus called "life in all its fullness";
- we don't have the freedom of God's forgiveness;
- we don't have the certain hope of resurrection and a home in heaven.

But God is so concerned that we should have these things, that he came in flesh, in his Son Jesus, to provide a way back, to be our Saviour, to redeem us from sin and death, and open to us the gate of heaven.

Now I know that those of you who come here regularly and are committed Christians know all of this: your calling and mine is to pass on this good news. I've also looked at the text of the *Imagine* project, and I know you're thinking of how you can change your ways of doing things so that this good news has more impact in your community. I don't think I can help with that, nor is it for me as an outsider to suggest specific things you should be doing.

But what I can do is to encourage you by showing how our readings affirm our faith and provide a solid base for mission. Let's look first at the gospel reading: it describes one of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection - but we know that a few weeks later he said goodbye to his disciples and was taken up to heaven. So how can we know him today? We're not going to bump into him walking round the town, so what does it mean to have a relationship with Jesus, with someone you can't see? Let me say three things about our gospel reading:

## **PRESENCE**

Jesus was definitely present with his disciples on the lakeside – he even shared breakfast with them. Today, of course, his presence isn't physical, but spiritual – but no less meaningful. After Jesus's ascension, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they realised that he was still with them in an even more powerful way. And still today, people who commit their lives to Jesus find that the Holy Spirit gives them that same assurance that Jesus is real.

Tony Campolo, an American pastor who also lectures in sociology, tells a story about two of his students: one, a brilliant student he had, a convinced Marxist, and therefore an atheist; the other a Christian who came every week to Tony's Bible study. When he heard that these two were to share accommodation, Tony was afraid that the Marxist would soon argue the Christian out of his faith. Some months later, Tony Campolo was surprised to learn that the Marxist had become a Christian. When he asked how this had come about, the former Marxist told him how the two students had

arguments every night, and always the Christian would agree that the Marxist had the soundest, most logical case. “But,” he would tell him, “you can’t convince me that you’re right! And you can’t because I know Jesus is real. I feel him in my life! I sense his presence every day! I have a personal relationship with him that cannot be questioned.”

***Let me tell you a story, p. 113***

In the end, the Marxist was convinced that what his Christian friend had was something real – and wanted it as well. Jesus is still present today.

And that presence is shown by his...

## **POWER**

On the lakeside, Jesus convinced the disciples of his presence first by a display of miraculous power – the ability to direct the disciples in the boat to a huge catch of fish. But the really important power he has is to change lives.

- We know how through the vision given to Peter, the first gentiles came to know the Lord and experience the power of his Spirit: “The Holy Spirit came down on them just as on us at the beginning.”
- We heard about an unbelieving student whose life was changed by Jesus;
- And every day, Jesus’ presence in the world is being shown by his power to transform people’s lives. Another story from our friend Tony Campolo:

He tells of one service when he felt he should offer people individual prayer for healing, even though he had doubts about how effective it would be. About 30 people came forward, and he prayed with them as sincerely as he could. Four days later, a woman phoned him and said, “Tony, last Sunday you prayed for my husband. He had cancer.”

When he heard the word “had”, his heart quickened. “*Had* cancer?” he asked. The woman answered, “Well, he’s dead now.”

A lot of good I did, he thought to himself. Then the woman explained. When she and her husband had attended that service, he knew he would soon be dead and was angry with God for letting it happen. More than anything, he wanted to see his grandchildren grow up. So for weeks, as he got angrier with God, he acted more and more nastily to other people. “But,” the woman said to Tony, “when he walked out of church after you had laid hands on him and prayed for him, I knew he was a different person. The last four days of his life were the best we’ve ever had together...he wasn’t cured, but he was healed.” *op cit, pp.34-35*

Jesus’ power is still shown today when people’s lives are transformed by his Spirit. But that last story shows that Jesus’ brings peace with God through forgiveness: that dying man had to ask God’s forgiveness for his anger before he could be at peace.

## **FORGIVENESS**

We heard how Jesus dealt with Simon Peter: after Jesus’ arrest, Peter had denied him three times. Jesus doesn’t need to remind him of that: what he does instead is to ask Peter three times whether he loves him. And as Peter answers “yes”, Jesus gives him a responsibility to look after those who belong to him: “Feed my sheep.” Although Jesus doesn’t mention the word “forgiveness”, this is exactly what he is offering Peter – and Peter knows it.

And it was because, as Paul writes, “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” that Jesus came into the world, to die on the cross to pay for the world’s sin, to obtain for us something more than ordinary forgiveness: the complete wiping out of the record of all we’ve done wrong, so that nothing stands between us and God. When we repent – ie. turn from our way to God’s way - and put our faith in Jesus as the One who saves us, then God forgives and forgets our past.

There’s a story of a Roman Catholic bishop who became a bit concerned about a woman in his diocese. Not only did she claim to have daily conversations with Jesus, but she’d also gathered a little

group around her, people who met every day to pray and to sing. Worried that this was getting out of hand, an untrained woman was taking on the rôle of a priest, the bishop went to visit her, and told her he thought her conversations with Jesus were part of her imagination.

To prove his point he said, “If Jesus is right here in this room now, and you can talk to him, then ask him to name the three sins I confessed this morning at the confessional. If you have what you believe to be a conversation with Jesus, and then name those sins, I might believe what you say.” The woman closed her eyes and sat for a while. Then she smiled, turned to the bishop and said, “I asked him, but Jesus said, ‘I forgot’.” *op cit, pp.20-21*

God forgives and forget our sins, and gives us a completely new start. Yes, we can go through life ignoring God, but we aren’t experiencing that fullness of life that Jesus came to bring. But with his presence comes his forgiveness and his power, just as they came to Peter and the disciples on that Galilean lakeside.

How can we, as a church and as individual Christians, help others to understand that there’s more to life than the next World Cup or Wimbledon, the right mobile phone or the latest computer game? This is the challenge for all Christians, but here you are taking it seriously.

As far as the church is concerned, I don’t know the answer for Creekmoor – but I do know of several imaginative and inspiring projects going on around Dorset. We heard about them at the Churches Together AGM a few months ago, eg:

- Donuts and the Police – offering pastoral support to the police on Portland
- Nightclub Chaplaincy – a late-night project offering support, perhaps physical as well as spiritual, to clubbers in Bournemouth
- Bridging Communities – just up the road in Poole, supporting community groups in new residential developments, and

organising children's activities, and seeking out the concerns of local people

- The Quiet Space – a building in Poundbury, Dorchester, providing what its name suggests: space for relaxation, quiet contemplation, and prayer.

These are just some examples of ways that the church is reaching out – I have a fuller list of projects and contact details. Creekmoor might need different ways of reaching out, but these ought at least to encourage and inspire you.

But what about our individual Christian witness? Forgive me for quoting at length from *Imagine*, especially if you've read it or heard it read before. But I thought it worth emphasising this section about the Christian in the workplace: "Many Christians are totally unaware of their potential to serve God where they are. They go to work, do a good job, try to be honest and dash home at the end of the day to go to the prayer meeting or to involve themselves in some church activity, so that they can 'do something for God' that day. They do not know that they have already served God. They do not know that whatever they do can be done to the glory of God.

"One woman I met put it this way: 'I've worked in the NHS for 17 years. And for many years I've wondered what ministry God had for me. About a year ago, I suddenly realised where God wanted me: right here in the NHS. And it has transformed my attitude to my job. How sad it is that some people die without realising the ministry God had for them.'

"If Christ isn't relevant to Christians where they spend most of their time, why should He be relevant to non-Christians where they spend most of their time? And if God isn't relevant to us where we spend most of our time, why would He be relevant where we spend less of our time?

"Furthermore, if we Christians don't live as if faith affects all of our life, then why should non-Christians believe that Christianity is relevant to all of theirs? If (others) don't see any difference about us

in our work time, then they will continue to believe that Christian activities are merely our preferred way of spending our leisure time - rather than the power plant of our entire existence.”

The writer goes on to point out not only the need to “model the Christian way”, but also the importance of “bringing the wisdom of Christ to bear on the way things are done - in a school, hospital or business...The Christian in God’s world has a mandate not only for verbal witness but also for social transformation.”

So...

- Remember the basis of your faith – the presence, power and forgiveness of Jesus
- Be encouraged and inspired by what is going on in other Christian communities around you.
- And ask God to make you the witness he wants you to be wherever you spend your time, in the workplace or at home, with friends or with strangers.

And of course we can do none of this without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every Sunday in Ducktown the ducks come out of their houses and waddle down the High Street to the duck church. They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and settles into the duck stalls. Then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. (Ducks seem to have their own special translation of the Scriptures.)

After the reading, the duck minister begins his sermon: “Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings, you can fly! With wings, you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds!”

It was such a good duck sermon that all the ducks shouted, “Amen!”

And they all waddled back home. **op cit, pp.81-82**

How will you go home today? On foot – or on the wings God has given you?