

## You are invited, invite others.

Recent statistics has shown that the number of people that identify themselves with the Christian faith has been declining in recent years. This has been attributed to different factors one of which is the loss of the culture of invitation and personal testimonies. Personal stories and experiences have always proved effective more than anything the sharing of the gospel. This morning, instead of a sermon, we will be doing something else.

Please listen carefully to my instructions. I want you to stand up, on your feet, if you have a coat, please do put it on as its cold and probably wet outside. As a group, we will now go out. There are stewards outside that are going to divide us into two groups. One group will be going to Sainsbury's and another will be going to Waitrose. Don't worry if you can walk for long, transport has been organised. As you go out, you will each be given some leaflets on why Jesus died? We will be distributing these at both Sainsbury's and Waitrose today. We will be evangelising the people of Cobham by witnessing to Christ and sharing our testimonies. So if you are ready lets go.

How many of us would really be up for this? Not many I suppose, when we hear words like "testimony," "witness," and "evangelism," it makes us prim and proper Church of England squirm in our pews.

Our reaction is often that of fear and trepidation or anxiety and horror. Images that come to mind are either that of the Street corner Evangelist brandishing hell fire and damnation on passers-by. Or perhaps that of the Tele evangelist such as Billy Graham and many others.

The role of the evangelist is one many of us would not want to be associated with. Hence, we find it difficult sharing our faith with friends and acquaintances not to talk of strangers.

Let me reassure you, I can totally understand this. I have experienced first hand what it might look like to tell others we are Christians. I remember vividly the first get together we were invited to when we moved to Cobham.

As with such things, everybody knew the host and get to know each other as the evening progresses. Drinks were served and nibbles were passed around. Put a couple of men together and the conversation always goes around sports generally football or golf and or politics. I was standing with a group of men and the conversation was on football and which team we support etc. I found out us two of us were supporting the same football team. The conversation was healthy and lively until someone asked me what I do for a living. When I told them I am a Priest, from their faces I could read the surprise. One asked me what I do during the week as I only work on Sundays! The other wanted to know more about what the church does and why we believe in a God we cannot see. The third did not say a word, he just walked away and throughout the evening I could sense him trying to avoid eye contact. The fourth just went on saying all the negative things he could find about the church and Christianity in general. You can only imagine how I felt.

I am sure you would have felt some of this when you tell your friends that you are a Christian. This has probably made it more difficult for you to share your faith with others. You may probably be saying to yourself, I cannot do this. I am not meant for this. You say to yourself I can tell them about Jesus through my actions that should be enough.

Then you may find reassurance in the supposedly famous words of Francis of Assisi, "preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary use words". Well I can tell you categorically, he did not say so.

Jesus said, go into the world and preach the gospel". The word preach, involves the use of words. The Great Commission that Jesus gave us was to go into the world and preach the good news.

How then do we do this in a society such as ours?

This morning, I want to offer some suggestions. Before I do this, we need to understand why many are antagonist to the message of Christ. Some of the reasons evoked are:

- Past wrongs of the church: religious wars, conflicts, persecutions...
- Negative publicity from the press: treatment of women, persecution for sexual orientation
- Behaviour of Church and Christians to one another: inter and intra church divisions
- Christians are gullible, judgemental with an "holier than thou" attitude

How then do we share the Gospel in such a society?

Since we cannot all be Billy Graham, how do we in our own ways using our own opportunities share the Gospel in a way that is presentable and accessible to others?

This is a balancing act and our Gospel reading this morning offers us a model, which shows the power of invitation and personal testimony.

The story begins with John the Baptist and two of John's disciples. John sees Jesus walking by, points to him and says to his disciples, "Look, there he is--the Lamb of God." John's disciples follow Jesus and when Jesus sees them he says, "What are you looking for?"

It is such a simple question with such profound implications. Every one of us is looking for something, aren't we? Some people are looking for happiness, some for fulfilment, some to discover a purpose for their lives, some are looking to contribute to the good of society, some to get involved, some to belong, some to find the answers to life's questions. "What are you looking for?" asks Jesus.

Their answer reveals that, like many of us, they don't really know how to express their heart's deepest desire. Its salvation, they need. They need to be saved by something or "Someone" bigger than themselves, but they don't know how to express it, so they say to Jesus, "Where are you staying?"

And Jesus replies, "Come and see."

I would suggest that all testimony, all witnessing, all evangelism is grounded in this simple invitation. "Come and see" It is not a high-pressure spiritual sales pitch like when the Jehovah's Witnesses ring your doorbell. Rather, it is a non-threatening, non-judgmental invitation. "Come and see." It is an invitation freely given.

Come and see is neither arrogant nor condescending. It is neither a command nor an order. It is an invitation which when gently and loving offered would be gently responded to.

Come and see as used here is a sharing of experience. It literally means come and experience what I have experienced. It is a way of sharing your personal story, telling others what you have seen of God. It is like John saying to the others, look.

How many times have you recommended a product or an item to someone? How many times have you recommended a restaurant to a friend because you loved the food and the service? How many times have recommended a movie to friend? How many times have you invited your friend or neighbour to tea? How many times have you invited someone to church or a church event?

Same way you have done these things. You could recommend Jesus to your friends. There are many opportunities here at St Andrew's. You could invite them to your Small Group if you are in one and you think this might better suit them. You could invite them to the Men's Curry and Conversation evenings, your children could invite theirs to come to Kid's Church on a Sunday, you

could invite them to the next Alpha Course if they want to further explore. You could invite them to the any of our services. The opportunities are numerous.

I am sure through these opportunities, they would get to know more about Christ and Christ himself will meet with them and they like Simon will go and look for their friends and brothers acclaiming we have found the Messiah and share His good news with others.

This week, why not share your experience of God with someone and invite them to come and see.