

Certain words conjure up images in our minds don't they? So I say chocolate and what comes to mind? Or seaside and perhaps a favourite beach comes to mind.

But what if I say Evangelism I wonder what comes to mind then. Evangelism is basically sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ but I wonder what comes to mind?

The things that come to mind may be Bible bashing, preaching on street corners, door knocking, dragging people into church and so on. Many of us have a negative response to the word.

As I hope you are aware this term we are building towards our Discover Mission and we hope to be doing some Evangelism but not I hope in those terms.

A better definition for evangelism comes from the Lost for Words course some of us shared in at the end of last year and it is this.

'Serving others so that they too may discover and respond to the good news of Jesus.'

Within that there are a number of threads to tease out:

- **Serving** - evangelism is about caring for people. Recognising that there is a need to know Jesus and then seeking to care for them and help them. It is not about domination, manipulation or coercion.
- **Discovery and response** – evangelism is about accompanying people on a journey of discovery in which we pray they will find faith. But we don't 'dump' information on people. It is not a matter of saying 'Here, have the gospel!'
- **Jesus** - evangelism is about introducing people to the good news of Jesus. It's not about promoting ourselves or our church.

Evangelism is at the heart of the Bible and over the next three weeks we are going to look at just five verses of the Bible as we think together about how you and I can serve others and help them to discover more about Jesus and his love for them.

The five verses are in Col 4:2-6.

Today I want to focus primarily on v5, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity." I think the verse has three parts to it. It speaks of being wise and making the most of opportunities but first we must think about what Paul meant by 'Outsiders'.

### 1. The "Outsiders"

The word outsiders sounds quite negative but Paul simply means those who are as yet outside the church, yet to find faith in Jesus. What I would not want to happen over the next few months is a kind of them and us mentality and certainly not an attitude of superiority.

I remember many years back two guys inviting me to a service in their church garden. After the service I was invited to join the youth group – OK it was quite a few years ago. I was at that point

what Paul describes here as an outsider but I was welcomed in and helped to be part of what was going on. I was on a journey and about a month later did discover Jesus. I am convinced that there are many others around us here in Chineham who are today in a similar situation. Some are here in church others may be at the moment in our homes and others are in our thoughts and prayers.

Just for a moment I want to try and pin down a little more who might be the people you and I might wish to serve especially in the coming months and help to discover more about Jesus.

I don't want to use the word outsiders or the word friends I want to use the word contacts because it is wider than friends and not negative like outsiders.

Who are the people you and I can help along the journey of faith?

Many of us may say I don't have friends with whom I can share my faith and I don't get on in that way with my literal neighbours. I want us to think a little more widely, to think about the many people we come into contact with in the course of a week.

If we put ourselves in the centre of the diagram then we can think with a series of six boxes about those we come into contact with, yes the boxes include friends, and they include neighbours, they include family members both those who live with us and those who are further away, but the boxes include those we come into contact with because they share an interest with us (sport, dog walking, U3A). Then of course there are our colleagues at work. Mark Greene in his book 'Thank God its Monday' sees the work place as the prime opportunity for living out and sharing our faith and in seemingly exasperation using Jesus analogy of calling the disciples to be 'fishers of men' he writes "we are encouraged to go out and fish in pools and puddles when we are sitting on a lake full of fish".

The final box is acquaintances. When I was looking at this with the people on the Lost for Words course I thought but I don't have any acquaintances but then I thought actually as I walk up and down the Reading Road there I do chat to a number of people. Then in Tesco I chat to a number of the staff there.

So who are your acquaintances? Who are the people you see every so often? I think it is a matter of thinking through the week and working out who you meet and then putting the name in the box.

Mind you, you may not even know the name but here is a starting point.

So here we are with a series of different people who together make up our contacts and perhaps from among whom are some whom we can serve by helping them on the path to discover more about Jesus.

## **2. Be wise**

Paul's words to the Christians in Colossae are to "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders".

But what does that mean? What did it mean for those Christians there and for you and I as we think about our contacts today? In this context, I would suggest that Paul was speaking of the ability to know what to say, when to say it and how to say it.

Earlier we had that reading from Acts 17 where Paul was in Athens. He walked the city and saw the temples and shrines to all the idols, even to the unknown God. Out of that he spoke to them of the God who does not live in temples. He spoke of the God who does not need to be fed and the God who is close and accessible.

When Paul spoke about being wise in the way they and we relate to those who are yet to discover Jesus he meant we need to understand people.

We need to understand their background, the things they have been through in life that have made them the people they are. We need to be aware of their beliefs, the things they understand, hold precious and important. We also need to be able to understand the blockages the things which might hold them back on their journey of faith. For many of these things it will be as we ask questions of people, get to know them and both see them as people and treat them as individuals not as “gospel –fodder”.

Just think for a moment of anyone you may have linked with one of the boxes from earlier.

What is their background, what do they believe, what might be the things holding them back or leading them off the path towards Jesus? Perhaps for some here this morning who are yet to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord these are questions for you – what is it that holds you back that stops you from being a follower of Jesus?

The call is to be wise and being wise means understanding people but also understanding how people come to faith.

Most people come to faith gradually - and over time. For many the journey may involve wrong turns, false starts, dead ends, periods of inactivity. People move backwards as well as forwards, and they take different routes. Evangelism is not necessarily about trying to convert people tomorrow. It is the process of helping people along the journey to faith in Christ.

In terms of our contact, is to ask, “what is the next appropriate step for the people we are in touch with?”

We tend to be always wanting people to make a response but no. By helping anyone to take steps forward in faith we are being faithful. It is the constant process or journey to faith we are interested in and it takes time. That helps to put our evangelism and expectations into perspective.

### **3. Maximising the opportunities.**

The reason Paul called the Colossian Christians to be wise towards those who are yet to become followers of Jesus is so that they could be of service in helping them along the path and not miss the opportunities.

Paul says, “make the most of every opportunity” that is every opportunity that presents itself.

If we are honest all of us have missed an opportunity at some point or other and perhaps quite often. I have done it myself even recently but one that sticks in my mind is when I was on a train journey and was sat next to an Australian. We got talking and eventually he asked me the question I hate to get, “and what line of business are you in?” I replied, “I am a clergyman”. To which he responded “oh that’s good”. Now I wonder what you might have said next? Well I didn’t. All I need to do was ask “are you a Christian” and we would have had the chance of a gospel conversation. But I didn’t and regret it.

I do remember listening to a talk once by an Australian evangelist who describe picking up a hitch hiker and when the guy asked the evangelist the same question got the answer “the church pays me to persuade people to become Christians!” I have often wanted to do the same but it is not my style. However we all need to take seriously what Paul says here about using the opportunities that come along to say something about our faith or to invite someone to an event.

As we have already mentioned in the service there are a number of events coming up in the next few weeks, There is the African workshop and meal, there is the men’s breakfast and beyond that a quiz night and then of course the Discover week. Plenty of opportunities to invite people.

We need to be wise and use those opportunities. You can’t invite your contact people to everything so what might you invite them to and how do you do that? How do you make the most of the opportunities that the discover events create? I think we need to be

**a. definite.** That is we need to be looking for opportunities to make contact with people to bring faith into our conversations and , to invite people to events. My prayer from before we started the path to Discover was that as a church we would have sharing our faith more on our agenda and I want that for us as individuals. As we go about our daily lives we should be conscious of our relationship with Jesus Christ and looking for the opportunity to share that with others.

**b. prayerful.** Each day asking God to bring into our orbit people with whom we may chat and the prayerful that we may be looking for and sensitive to the opportunities to say something about our faith. If you are looking to invite someone to an event be prayerful before you talk to them, while you are talking to them and after you have spoken with them.

**c. natural.** We need to learn to naturally talk about church and church things. If it is part of our natural and daily conversation with people then say at work it becomes easier to talk about what we are doing and to invite people to them.

Friends what I want us to do as a result of what Paul says here, “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity”, is to be thinking who are the people I am in contact with? To discover more of where they are at in terms of faith. To think about how you might be used to move them further along that path of faith and finally to make use of the opportunities that the Discover events will provide over the next three months.

We have some great events planned for the next three months and more in the pipeline but Discover will not be successful because we have planned great events. We are looking forward very much to Nick Tucker and the team from Oak Hill joining with us in March but Discover will not be successful because of the team from Oak Hill. Discover will be successful if we as a church grow in our understanding of the opportunities to share our faith and if we as a church are prayerfully making contact with people and inviting them to the events that are planned.

God’s word to each of us today is “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”