

Last week I was saying that Discover will only be a success if we as a church are prayerfully making contact with people, talking to our contact people about our faith, and inviting those people to the events that are planned. That is what Paul's words in Col 4:5 means for us today when Paul said, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity."

As I explained last week I am using the word contacts to describe the wide range of people we know ranging from close friends through to people who serve us in the shops but who we would love to see come to faith and who we might be used by God to help along that path of discovering Jesus. However many of us admit that we are not sure what to say to people about our faith which was why we did the 'Lost for words' course last term and why we are doing this little series from Col 4:2-6 which is distilled from Lost for words.

Many years ago, not long after I had come to faith, a young man I knew a little asked me a question along the lines of what does it mean to be a Christian. Two hours later I don't think he was much the wiser. So what do we say to our contacts about what we believe and why we believe it?

Paul in Col 4:6 wrote, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

The overall sense of the verse for those early Christians was that they should be able to speak graciously about their faith to those who had yet to come to believe in Jesus and to be able to explain their faith.

But for many of us centuries later we are still left with the questions what would I say and the real fear as expressed in that course title that we will be "Lost for words".

Sorry it is confession time. Just after Christmas I was watching TV and Mary Poppins was on and so I lost myself in it for half an hour. I'm sure you will remember how when Mary has won the horse race on a horse from the Carousel someone comments, "there probably aren't words to describe your emotions". Then she comes up with the word 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' and in the song Bert explains how he was lost for words as a boy until he came across the word. Well I am sorry but I can't give us one word to save us from being Lost for Words but I can try and help us with a few thoughts and some hopefully memorable frameworks so that we won't feel lost for words but rather that there are always words we can use and use helpfully to point people to Jesus.

Paul said "Let your conversation be always full of grace" meaning that what we say should be generous, giving, understanding, attractive and loving. But also grace is about God's great love and I want to think for a moment about how we might, in our conversations with people, explain the grace of God, what it means and how it has affected our lives.

### **1. God's story**

The Bible tells the story of what God's grace from the creation of the world, through human rebellion and sin, the sending of Jesus to restore humanity to God and finally his return. However, it's a big book giving us a long story to tell. How do we decide what to include and what to omit? Imagine you are going on holiday and travelling by air. You have one suitcase and a ton of stuff. So you have to limit what you will take.

When it comes to sharing God's story with people we cannot tell the whole story even if we could remember it. We need to limit what we might say to the essentials.

I am going to suggest one framework now. It features in John Chapman's book Know and Tell the Gospel and in a slightly different version in Lost for Words and I have copied that for us. So what is the heart of the gospel?

Here is the framework, God, man, God, what if I do, what if I don't?

**God** created the world and everything in it. He made us humans to have a relationship with him.

**Man**, however rebelled against God. In the Bible it tells of Adam and Eve rejecting God's clear command. But we know it from our own experience that we don't live up to our own standards let alone God's.

**God**, is holy and can have nothing to do with evil and therefore each of us deserves God's punishment for our refusal to let God be God in our lives. However, God loves us and knowing there was nothing we humans could do to change the situation, sent his own son Jesus Christ into the world to die on a cross taking the punishment that we deserved for our wrong doing and through that death God accepts us as his children. He asks us to accept what Jesus has done for us and be restored in a friendship with him that he had intended when he created the world.

**What if I do**, accept that? Then I know God's forgiveness and am restored as his child now and into eternity.

**What if I don't** accept, then God allows me to go my own way but ultimately I will be cut off from God for all eternity.

Now that, in my script at least is only 212 words but it is the five things, which you can remember on the fingers of your hand, I hope will prove helpful and will mean you don't have to be lost for words. This is God's story. This is what we believe as Christians.

## **2. My story**

But what effect does this have in our lives? Why do we believe?

What is your story? How did you come to faith and could you tell it to your contact person if they asked you?

I think it is important that we focus on our story for a number of reasons.

a. it earths the gospel. It shows that faith is not a theory but something that works out in our lives

b. people are interested in human stories

c. people may disagree with what we believe and want to challenge us on why Jesus died or if he rose but your story is your story and it happened to you so in that sense can't be challenged.

So what is your story and more to the point how do you tell it?

I became a Christian when I was 21. I had been interested in Christian things for a few years and been to church occasionally. I was impressed by the Christians I met but couldn't be good like they seemed to be. Every so often I would try hard to be good but then lose my temper or something. Then I was invited to a church and to the youth group. One weekend we all went away together and on the Sunday afternoon a man was speaking about Jesus and his death on the cross. He explained that Jesus died to take the punishment for my sin. That because of his death I could be forgiven for everything I had done wrong and start a new life with God. It was as if a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. It wasn't about me being good but about what Jesus had done for me. That afternoon I asked God the Father to forgive me and told Jesus I wanted to follow him. My life hasn't been perfect since then. I have always been good but I know God loves me, I know there is a purpose to my life and I know I will share eternity with God.

That is my story in a nutshell but with a framework. Those who have been baptised as adults in recent years will know that when I ask them to give their testimony or tell their story I ask them to use three pointers, what I was, what God did and how I changed.

Now many of us may have grown up in a Christian family and so not had the kind of experience I had. Can I offer you three other pointers.

Many who grow up in Christian home **remember** their childhood and Sunday school and church and so on. In some way they come to **realise** that if faith is to be real it has to be personal and so they **react** to that and in some way by asking forgiveness or committing to following Jesus.

So what is your story the story of God's grace in your life? I am hugely tempted to stop here and get you to tell someone but I won't. However two things, one the sheet has the frameworks I have mentioned on it but even more, two at the end of the service why not ask someone to tell you their story. It will encourage you and help them to begin getting it straight in their minds.

Now having set out some frameworks I want to come a little away from them for Paul didn't have in mind people learning something almost by rote and trotting it out. He spoke here of

### **3. Conversations**

As I look back to what I said to the young man I realise it wasn't a conversation and being a teacher often what I do is not hold a conversation. However, it is essential that we do hold conversations with our contact people. We ask questions and listen to answers and we respond to questions that

they have. That doesn't mean we have to disregard the frameworks I have just given but rather be prepared to come into our framework at different points and often only mention just one aspect. So someone may say to you "but the church so often get's it wrong. I mean look at the shambles over women Bishops". There are many things we could say to that but in terms of God's story we could respond something like "yes it is true the church does get things wrong because the church is just people isn't it? As people we all get things wrong and all do things wrong don't we?" Then you are at point two, man, and, depending on the response, can lead on from that to something like and that's the reason why God the Father sent Jesus his son.

In terms of my own story I could say something like "yes often in the church as a whole and even in the local church we do have differences of opinion on certain things and we even get a bit annoyed with each other but I found that that the heart of the Christian faith was the same in every church and it was that truth which helped me on my path to believing in Jesus." From there I could ask a question about the other person's experience of church and so on and through that going back to last week find out a bit about their background, beliefs and any blockages they might have.

So in regards this two things to lodge with us.

a. we should be working at having chats with people not thinking we have to deliver a monologue and b. that means we need to have God's story and our story clear in our minds so we can come into these stories at any point and be content at simply saying one thing rather than feel we have to say the whole thing.

#### **4. Answers**

The final thing Paul said was "so that you may know how to answer everyone."

That of course is a great concern for many of us. I have often when chatting with people been asked difficult questions, "if God is good why is there suffering", "why are there so many faiths" and so on. Can I give us some quick tips and then, if you are not taking notes, remind you that the text of this sermon like all our sermons will later be on the website.

a. sometimes it is good to ask a question back to ascertain why the person wants to know. It may simply to see you squirm or they may really have an issue. I have had plenty of questions fired at me in pubs and so on but when someone asked me "why is my daughter suffering" well that's different.

b. don't feel you have to give the definitive answer. Sometimes it is good to say "I'm not sure. Can I go away and think about that?"

c. if it is a genuine question and if the answer will help someone along the path of faith do at some point try and work through the question with the person but again as part of a conversation not as a lecture. There are books like this one 'good question' which give answers to many questions or

'Searching Issues' from the Alpha course which can help us in answering questions or we can give to our contact person to help them.

**d.** don't be afraid of questions and don't feel if we can't answer we have somehow failed a test as a Christian or that we have failed God. God is big enough to stand up for himself and a person coming to faith will not depend upon whether you or I give the right answer to a question always supposing there is a right answer.

There are some here who find it easy to talk to others about their faith but many of us don't.

However if we can take on board some of what we have been looking at this morning, if we can think about God's story and our story then we will be better equipped and will more naturally be able to talk about our faith and be part of helping people Discover Jesus.

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." – through this we can be signposts pointing others to faith in Christ.