

“LIVING A LIFE THAT MATTERS – 1”
Zechariah 8:18-23; John 1:35-51

Those of you here this morning who work in education will know the feeling that starts to come over you when the word OFSTED is mentioned. If you work in the banking or insurance sectors the letters FSA may well have the same effect. For many of you the mention of the Health and Safety Executive will start to get the pulse racing and for pretty well anyone who goes out to work, if anyone mentions “appraisal” or “restructuring” you start to feel a bit nervous. Even if you’re not at work you might have experienced a similar feeling of nervousness when someone mentions to you that it’s about time you filled in your tax return. Sweaty palms, restless nights, a sense of foreboding – feelings often triggered by the mention of certain words. And many people will try all kinds of avoidance tactics to try and put off the awful moment of the visit or the meeting or the need to get on and do something.

Many Christians – probably quite a few of you here today – may experience the same sort of response if anyone mentions the dreaded word “evangelism”, or its equally scary synonyms “mission”, “outreach” or “witness”. The idea that you might have to tell other people about your beliefs or admit to following Jesus or explain something about your Christian faith can leave you a little nervous, lost for words and eager to find some other activity which contributes to the life of the Kingdom but doesn’t involve you having to say anything to anyone outside the four walls of this church. We find all kinds of ways of avoiding getting personally involved in mission because many of us just don’t fancy the idea that we might be called to say something about our faith – after all, we’ve got people we pay to do that kind of thing, haven’t we?

Partly, I think, there’s a certain amount of reserve – we don’t like to be thought “pushy”. Our Christian faith is not something we need to “market”. We may expect opposition or ridicule if we start talking about such things, so we would rather avoid any unpleasantness with our friends and colleagues. We’re not sure we’ll have the right words, anyway, and if saying something about what we believe leads on to longer conversations, we’re worried we might not have the answers to the questions that others pose. I suspect that most of our reasons for a sense of nervousness and hesitation in talking about our faith, sharing the good news about Jesus, are to do with our own feelings rather than any theological objections based on ideas about God’s will and predestination.

But just stop and think for a moment about the other things that we are involved in, about the things which other people talk to us about. Lots of people – including many of us here today – show a real zeal when it comes to talking about other things that are part of our lives. People are very happy to talk about their enthusiasm for the gym or going to Weight-Watchers (or similar groups) or getting and selling stuff on E-bay or the films, books, music, television programmes that they’ve enjoyed. And I guess many of us have responded to the enthusiasm of others and bought the book or been to see the film or started watching the television series – as well as being instrumental in getting others to do whatever it is.

Why should that be the case? What comes over when people are trying to persuade you to join in with their particular passion of the moment? Sometimes it’s simply their enthusiasm, their overwhelming desire to get others to join in their enjoyment. If it’s something that is particularly trendy – the latest film, a current television programme, an up-and-coming band, a new gym that’s opened – there’s a kind of buzz that sweeps people up in it. Sometimes you agree to try something simply because the other person is so insistent and want to get them off your back, so you take the book or agree to go along to a meeting or sign up to something they’ve recommended. Often it’s because you see that it works – the person has been to Fat Fighters and lost three stone so you want to try it too, or they’ve been using a particular face cream that has clearly got rid of their wrinkles and you think you could do with a bit of that, or their coffee does always taste a bit better than yours so you buy the stuff they’re always on about. People get very excited about stuff and you can see that it works.

So – back to Jesus. We read a few verses from John’s Gospel about the first disciples that Jesus called. That short story focussed on two in particular, Andrew and Philip. Both of them were obviously affected by their meeting with Jesus and by his calling of them to spend time with him. And what did each of them do? They rushed off and shared their passion with others. Andrew went and told his brother, Simon, who was to become a pillar of the Church. Philip went and told his friend Nathanael and, despite Nathanael’s initial objection, took him to see Jesus. They were clearly excited about Jesus, about the possibilities that he held out for them and about the way in which he was, to some extent, what they’d been looking for. Both Andrew and Philip say that they’ve found the person who had been foretold by the prophets.

And they are not the only ones to behave like this. Think of all those people whom Jesus healed – many of whom he told to keep it to themselves. They all rushed off to tell others about the transformation in their lives. Just one more example – the woman whom Jesus met at the well in Sychar (it’s in *John 4*). She spoke with Jesus and was so deeply affected by what she heard and what Jesus did that she left her water jar and rushed back into the town to get everyone else to come and hear him. These people recognised that Jesus was someone special and wanted other people to experience him as they had. It seems very natural really – just as if they’d come across a new product that they knew was going to work.

Evangelism – mission, outreach, witness or whatever you want to call it – isn’t about standing on street corners or climbing into pulpits with a prepared spiel about Christian doctrine. It’s about living lives that matter, lives that are naturally full of Jesus, lives that are so enthusiastic about this man who has transformed our lives and our values that it just spills over into all that we do and say. It’s about living lives of true discipleship, because wherever you look in the New Testament or in the history of the Church, the true disciples of Jesus are those whose lives are fully engaged in mission. If you live a life that matters, then it will be obvious that Jesus is in there somewhere.

Now, I’m not talking here about a kind of false enthusiasm, or an enthusiasm that is blinkered to the extent that it doesn’t acknowledge problems and pain – a kind of false happiness that is easily seen through. I’m talking about a deep passion for Jesus that literally affects everything that you are. Just like the Villa fan whose every conversation is about the team and the manager and the results, who wears the shirts and fills his bedroom walls with banners and posters, who spends every match day at the ground – just like the Slimmers’ World member who has to whip her calorie counting book out of her purse every time anyone offers her a biscuit and has a ‘phone app that will tell her how much she can eat of a product by scanning the barcode with her Smartphone – just like the Archers fans who know every storyline since 1951 and want you to as well, who e-mail the actors and arrange their daily routine around the broadcasts – that’s what the Christian should be like: living a life that is totally immersed in the good news of Jesus.

And a life that is that immersed in Jesus, that is that eager to bring others to meet him, should be a life in which others can see that it works, that it makes a difference, that there is something special about you. If we allow God’s Holy Spirit to work in us and keep asking him for more of that heavenly power, then others will notice. Look again at what happened in the early Church. In *Acts 2:47* and *5:13* we read that these first followers of Jesus Christ were living their lives in such a way that they gained the respect of the people around. And in the first of those two references it meant that more and more people joined the Church – they could see that it was real! The idea wasn’t to say what great people these Christians were, but what a great God they served, what a great person Jesus was. He actually says that’s the point of it in The Sermon on the Mount, in *Matthew 5:16*. And Peter says similarly in *1 Peter 2:12*.

You see, when I talk to people who are not yet Christians and they tell me why they don’t want to get involved, very, very few of them ever say that they have deep theological issues or that they can’t get their head round the philosophical questions. There are one or two like that, but even with them if you dig around a bit you find that they don’t want anything to do with it because they’ve been put off by the Christians themselves who either live lives that seem very boring and who lack the fun that they experience, or who live lives that really are at odds with what Jesus teaches. If we are to help other people find Jesus – as Andrew, Philip and the woman at the well did – then we need to live good lives naturally, to

live lives that demonstrate that Jesus really does make a positive difference and that we really love him for that. We need to live lives that matter – personally and as a church.

Now you don't need to read a franchised book from America to help you with that. You don't necessarily need a course of training and a certificate to do that. You don't need to get into any fearful, guilt-inducing self-examination to do that. You need simply to let Jesus work in your life by his Holy Spirit, to allow God to influence all that you do and say. (As I was writing that, an e-mail popped up on my screen and in it the person wrote that he hoped his correspondents were "having a good week", but he missed an "o" out and it said, "I hope you're having a **god** week". That's what we really need!) I'm going to suggest a couple of things this morning that we can all get involved in – maybe they seem a bit vague, but next week we'll look at how we can help ourselves get used to living lives that matter.

Firstly, we need to live lives of **PASSION**. We need to be passionate about Jesus, to live with real enthusiasm for him, a deep love for him. Just as in a human relationship we might say we love someone but we have to work at that love, at nurturing it and helping it to grow and deepen – especially within a marriage, for example – so we need to foster that real passion for Jesus by talking to him in prayer, by reminding ourselves of what he's done for us through reading the Bible and thinking back over our lives with him, by listening to what he says to us, by not forgetting that he is part of our lives. Maybe you need to re-ignite that passion by recommitting yourself to him, by telling him once again that you receive his love and offer him yours. Maybe you need to de-clutter your lives of all the stuff that's getting in the way – paradoxically you may be so taken up with doing things for Jesus and for his church that you've forgotten why you're doing them – or even that you're doing them for him at all (if, indeed, you are).

We've got so used to doing the same sort of stuff in an effort to express that that it's all getting a bit jaded. The words we use to pray and praise have lost their power to thrill us. The stories we read in the Bible are so familiar we've forgotten just how mind-blowingly awesome they are. And when things do happen in our lives that really remind us how much Jesus loves us, we rarely even share them with other Christians over coffee after a Sunday service, let alone with our colleagues, friends and family on Monday morning. Be eager to live as Jesus wants you to. Be inspired by him, motivated by him, excited by him. Next week, we'll look at ways of cultivating that **RELATIONSHIP** with Jesus.

And secondly, we need to live lives of **PURITY**. As we've said, many people are put off Christianity by Christians and a word that is often used is hypocrisy. It's not always used fairly, I have to say, and we also need to acknowledge that we are still human and prone to temptation and to failure like anyone else. But God has promised to help us live for him and we do need to be people who stand out because of our lives of purity – of holiness or integrity. Isn't that what Peter was saying in that verse we looked at earlier on? We need to stick to God's ways, to live as he wants us to, always alert to the possibilities of sin and aware of what our weaknesses are. Christians who swear, tell dirty jokes, are abusive to their partners, don't stick to the law of the land while they're driving, immerse themselves in violence or pornography, concern themselves too much with money and material possessions, concern themselves too little with the outcasts and the poor – and we could add all kinds of other things too – they are people who are not living lives of purity. Next week we'll look at the way in which we need to put down **ROOTS** deep in God's word and in prayer if we're going to do that, but just for now reflect on your own life and what it says about how seriously you take Jesus' teaching.

Now let's not beat ourselves over the head with this. If you're here this morning, then you're on the right lines. And as a church there are many ways in which we are starting to fulfil these things within the life of this community. But it is as individual Christians that we can really have an impact on the people of this city. It is in our own day to day lives that we need to take all this on board and try, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live lives that really matter. Earlier we read from *Zechariah*, one of the Old Testament prophets and the short passage we read contains an image that is one of my favourites on this subject. There's the Jewish person, liberated by God, enjoying his blessings, and so obviously so that others are begging to be a part of it all. Wouldn't that be a great way to do our evangelism! Simply walking along,

but so passionate about Jesus and living lives of such purity that people plead, “*Let us go with you, because we’ve heard that God is with you.*” Let’s live lives that matter, lives of passion and purity.

Wade Street Church 19.02.12 am

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For many Christians the word “evangelism” is a very scary one. The idea that we might have to tell other people about our beliefs or admit to following Jesus or explain something about our Christian faith can leave us a little nervous, lost for words and eager to find some other activity which contributes to the life of the Kingdom. But lots of people – including many of us – show a real zeal when it comes to talking about other things that are part of our lives. People get very excited about stuff and we can see that it seems to work.

This short story focusses on two of Jesus’ first disciples, Andrew and Philip. Both of them were obviously affected by their meeting with Jesus and by his calling of them to spend time with him. And they rushed off and shared their passion with others. They were clearly excited about Jesus, about the possibilities that he held out for them and about the way in which he was, to some extent, what they’d been looking for. And they are not the only ones to behave like this. Think of all those people whom Jesus healed – many of whom he told to keep it to themselves, but they all rushed off to tell others about the transformation in their lives. And the woman whom Jesus met at the well in Sychar (*John 4*) spoke with Jesus and was so deeply affected by what she heard and what Jesus did that she left her water jar and rushed back into the town to get everyone else to come and hear him. These people recognised that Jesus was someone special and wanted other people to experience him as they had.

Evangelism is really about living lives that matter, lives that are naturally full of Jesus, lives that are so enthusiastic about this man who has transformed our lives and our values that it just spills over into all that we do and say. It’s about living lives of true discipleship. And a life that is that immersed in Jesus, that is that eager to bring others to meet him, should be a life in which others can see that it works, that it makes a difference, that there is something special about us. If we allow God’s Holy Spirit to work in us and keep asking him for more of that heavenly power, then others will notice. Look *Acts 2:47* and *5:13*. The idea wasn’t to say what great people these Christians were, but what a great God they served, what a great person Jesus was. Look at *Matthew 5:16* and *1 Peter 2:12*.

Firstly, we need to live lives of **PASSION**. We need to be passionate about Jesus, to live with real enthusiasm for him, a deep love for him. We need to foster that real passion for Jesus by talking to him in prayer, by reminding ourselves of what he’s done for us through reading the Bible and thinking back over our lives with him, by listening to what he says to us, by not forgetting that he is part of our lives.

And secondly, we need to live lives of **PURITY**. We need to be people who stand out because of our lives of holiness or integrity. We need to stick to God’s ways, to live as he wants us to, always alert to the possibilities of sin and aware of what our weaknesses are.

In *Zechariah 8* we have a picture of a Jew, liberated by God, enjoying his blessings, and so obviously so that others are begging to be a part of it all. Wouldn’t that be a great way to do our evangelism!

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think evangelism means? Why is it such a problem for many Christians?
2. What makes you want to try out the products or activities that others rave about? And what makes you want to ignore them? What can we learn about that for our evangelism?
3. Do you feel a real passion for Jesus? How might other people notice it? How can we maintain that passion?

4. Purity (or holiness or integrity) seems less popular than once it was. Why do you think that is? If we stick to such ideals don't we run the risk of being thought killjoys or out of touch?
5. How might we redraw Zechariah's picture of the Jew for today?