

Sermon by Judy Youmans in St Hilda's - 21st May 2017

What do you say?

Imagine if an old friend comes to visit for the weekend, you haven't seen them for a long time and have, during that interval, become a Christian. You have a great time catching up and chatting about old times and what has happened in your lives, your work, and your families. It's Sunday morning. What do you do? Normally you'd get up and go to church. But today? Maybe just give it a break, stay home and spend time with them. Maybe go to an early service (less of an option here) or give them the papers, suggest they might like to take it easy and promise to be back soon ... or...(drumroll, nervous applause) ask them to come along.

Or what do you say if someone in the middle of a conversation asks you, "Why are you a Christian? How can you believe in a God who allows ...death, famine, child abuse.... to happen?" Some of us have had a major change in our lives when we became Christian. We can testify that our lives have been changed for the better by following Jesus Christ. We have story to share.

For many of us here we have always been Christian. We were brought up in a Christian household, went to Sunday school, were confirmed, married in the church, and brought our children to church. We don't know how it feels to be converted, to feel a great change in what we believe. How do we explain it to others? We don't have a testimony of a dramatic change of direction in our lives. We have always believed and that belief may have grown and developed through our lives and our experiences but it has always been there. God has always been with us.

The Bible speaks about the 'Good News' but what is it exactly? What do we say when we are asked? Or do we simply fudge it and change the subject, looking embarrassed or say, "I don't really know, I'd have to ask the vicar, they're the expert in that type of thing?"

In our reading from Peter, we are told to always have an answer ready. In Acts 2 Peter speaks to gathered crowds in Jerusalem and shares his version of the Good News: God came among them in Jesus, as was promised, they killed him but he rose from the dead and they needed to repent right now. This isn't a

version that is going to have a great deal of traction in 21st century New Zealand.

In the Acts reading Paul has his explanation for the Greeks of Athens, pagans who had different world view from that of the Jews, for whom Philosophy was important. He appeals to the Unknown God and tells them of Jesus, a God who created the world, was close to them and wanted to have a relationship with them.

In New Zealand, very few people seem to believe in any god. We understand things so much more clearly and have scientific explanations for things that in the past were a mystery and possibly supernatural. Nowadays we know better! If you must talk about religion then you need to allow all religions to be represented and have a fair go. Trying to teach about Christianity in schools becomes more difficult as it takes just one parent to object or, sometimes, the school authorities object just in case someone might object in the future. They forestall any problems.

Many people have never set foot in a church and 'Jesus' is a swear word but not a very serious one. Blasphemy is still a crime but no one has been charged with it decades. Weddings happen in gardens and on beaches, funerals in the funeral directors rooms and there is no mention of God or perhaps a vague, fuzzy mention that everything will be ok and all will meet again in the afterlife because we cannot imagine a world without us.

So what do we say? Peter and Paul lived in a world that assumed everyone believed something. There was debate about exactly what and sometimes the arguments resulted in the losers dying but at least there was a god to argue about.

Now many people believe only in themselves and what they can do. They don't need a supernatural being to guide and hold their hand. They can do it for themselves...until it all goes wrong. Our society is not keen on suffering and tries to ignore it as much as possible. If that is impossible we try to blame someone. Why is the pill or treatment that will help not immediately available? Others take the view that it is unnecessary and we wouldn't let an animal suffer like that so why can't we choose to die when it suits us? Mostly we try to ignore death and dying as much as possible.

Life is about growing up, getting the qualifications to get a good job, a car, a house, a family and a respected position in society. But now these things are more difficult. I heard a report of university students who are unable to afford food, particularly around exam time when they can't work part time because they need to study. When they get their qualification of any kind they will have student loan which is generally substantial.

Housing is becoming extremely difficult to get into, Auckland's prices spreading throughout the country. Even if you do have a good job it is no guarantee that you will be able to afford a deposit, or if you can you may be so far from work that you can hardly afford to get there, never mind the hours you spend travelling. Family are often the ones who help out with the deposit or a place to live.

The news about the world is not reassuring; famine, war, threats back and forth and stories of atrocities fill our screens. Even the things that we take for granted, like going to the doctor and getting an antibiotic for our illness or going for a swim in the river where we have always gone are threatened if not already a memory.

The drugs we hear about are: if they will cure disease often too expensive for us to afford; or addictive substances that come in ever changing and increasingly dangerous forms that result in destructive behaviour for the user and anyone that they come across.

Good News is precisely what people need, even if they may not be aware of it.

So what is the good news that we, as Christians, have to tell?

God loves us.

God created us and our beautiful world and longs to be in relationship with us even when we want to go our own way. Even when we think that we know better or when it is inconvenient.

God loves us so much that He came and lived with us in the person of Jesus. He loved us first. He came to restore the broken relationship, to provide a way back to God and to allow us to grow into the people that we are designed to be.

Sometimes we feel unlovable. We can see that God might love others, but if He really knew me and what I have done or what I think then He would ignore me at best.

Psalms 139 speaks of God knowing us from the moment of our conception in the womb, before we are even borne, throughout our lives, every moment. For some people that is terrifying, but really it is quite the opposite. Because God knows everything, even the things we don't want to admit to ourselves, we don't have to pretend, put on a smiley face, say, "everything is fine thanks" when it is far from the truth.

God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. We can be honest with ourselves, which can be painful as we come face to face with parts of ourselves that we don't want to admit to. And when we come to those places we can change, the Holy Spirit is there to guide and support us and give us the strength. Instead of being terrifying it is such a relief. No more pretence. I can be me, not the someone that I think that society thinks I should be.

Jesus modelled a life of love and a relationship with God the Father in mutual love and self-giving and invites us to join in so that we can be part of the loving relationship and also show that loving lifestyle to others that they might wish to join in.

The Holy Spirit dwells within us to strengthen and to guide us and help us to become who we are designed to be. It's a process and takes at least a lifetime.

A couple of weeks ago I talked about the 4 marks of the early church: coming together to share the Lord's Supper, remembering what God has done for us; fellowship as we share each other's cares and concerns and joys and laughter; preaching the good news and as John used to say, sometimes even using words; and prayer, as we speak with God, sharing our joys and concerns and listening to His response and just being quiet with Him, resting in His presence.

Those 4 marks of the church are still true today. We don't always get it right, but then neither did the first disciples who were with Jesus himself. We haven't been left alone to manage as best we can. The Holy Spirit dwells within us guiding and supporting us and as we come up to Pentecost we remember

the excitement of that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples.

As we come to that time we are asked to take time to consider and pray, to allow the Holy Spirit to move in us and guide us. There is a worldwide prayer movement called "Thy Kingdom Come" lead by the Archbishop of Canterbury calling Christians of all denominations to pray from Ascension Day to Pentecost. Later we will have a video that introduces it and Terry will explain how we will participate here at St Hilda's.

Let us pray:

Lord as we pray together the words of the prayer you taught us may we be aware of your presence with us, dwelling in us through your Holy Spirit, and may we join the prayers around the world, May your kingdom come. Amen.