

## GETTING OUT AMONG THE UNCHURCHED

A SERMON FOR ST PAULS. SUNDAY, 29<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2007

Some time last year, I preached a very unbalanced sermon. Or so I was informed by a sermon reviewer who spoke to me after the service. Now normally, if someone critiques your preaching efforts you can retain some semblance of personal pride by wondering if the critic really could do any better than you have just done. Of course, one never wonders this out loud, in the presence of the critic.

However, on this occasion that I was critiqued as having delivered an unbalanced, if not exactly wobbly, address, I was compelled to the view that this particular critic should be heard out.

The critic was the venerable and apparently immortal Vic Maddick. Now I suspect Vic has preached more fine sermons than I've had hot coffees. And I'll bet every one of those sermons was perfectly constructed, impeccably logical, disarmingly clear and simple, and delivered with every consonant and vowel perspicuously enunciated. Vic's sermons always seem to me to be like a wide gateway with liberally oiled hinges, just ideal for the Holy Spirit to slip through and reveal the presence of God to everyone in the congregation.

So if Vic Maddick is telling me that my sermon was unbalanced, I better listen.

"How do you mean unbalanced?" I asked, steering Vic away from the narthex lest anyone should overhear.

"Well," Vic explained, "For a start I think you only had two points."

I agreed with his arithmetic.

"And you spent 15 minutes on the first one, and four minutes on the second one. You should try to make three points, and give them equal weight."

I was tempted to defend my wobbly method by saying that I thought I understood my first point more than my second one, so I put my energies where I was more confident. Somehow I felt this would only make matters worse.

I would like to say I have since taken Vic's admonishments to heart, but that would not be true. I remain a preacher more in the stream-of-consciousness mode of a Virginia Woolf, than the architectural logic and clarity of a C.S. Lewis. According to the preachers' textbook, proper preachers sit down with a three-point template. Proper preachers tell us what they are going to tell us, then they tell us, then they tell us what they told us. Proper preachers have two or three illustrations to help us understand each of their three points. And they get it all done in 20 minutes flat.

But I don't have the skill to engineer a sermon like that. I'm afraid I just let the ideas hang around in my head for a few weeks. I ruminate. I'm a great ruminator. Well, maybe "great" is not the right adjective. Ruminating, thinking about the topic, is really just me putting off that horrible moment when I sit down to a blank page in Microsoft Word and write "Sermon for St Paul's" and click on the icon for the Heading 1 Style. I keep thinking about the sermon. I get great ideas, or so they seem, and then I forget them.

Finally, it gets to be Friday or Saturday and I must start, so I say a little panicked prayer to God and I turn the computer on. And I begin. And I write. And I make my first point. And tell my first story. And then I think of

something else to say, so I write that too. And then I get a moment of inspiration that is clearly divine, so I thank God quickly and write that in. And then, I think I've said enough about that point, so I write the next one. And then Judy calls out if I would like a cup of coffee and I think of including her in my sermon, but I resist the temptation (until now anyway) and enjoy my coffee and God says "He'll do better with caffeine in him" and away I go again.

And after some hours of this torture, I come to the end. And I have a sermon – an unbalanced two point sermon.

But not today.

No. Today folks, I have three points. And I wish to celebrate this feat of God's amazing grace by telling you what they are before I tell you.

I wish to make three points this morning.

First point. Jesus seems to have spent most of his ministry among the unchurched. Maybe we should too.

Second point. One of the reasons we Christians have difficulty in relating to the unchurched, is because we have been too thoroughly church-ed.

Third point. The role of the Christian in relation to the unchurched is to be the presence of God.

These are my three points. If you like you can put your iPod headphones back in your ears, while I attempt to say what these three points mean.

**First point. Jesus seems to have spent most of his ministry among the unchurched. Maybe we should too.**

This story we heard this morning is about the calling of Levi, or Matthew. Why does he have two names? This is not the most important question, but it does seem to be one that always crops up. Why is he Levi in one Gospel and Matthew in another?

Some commentators try to tell us that Levi is the Hebrew version and Matthew is the Greek version. But this is just not right. Matthew is a perfectly good name in both Hebrew and Greek.

Simpler to point out that sometimes people do have more than one name. My Dad was christened John, but everyone called him Jack. My Dad christened me Philip, and Mum used to call me Boofhead.

The important point of this story is that when Jesus calls Matthew-Levi to be one of his twelve, one of his closest associates, he is calling someone who is clearly Unchurched.

Not just somebody who was a bit irregular in their church going. Matthew-Levi never went to church. He wouldn't have been allowed in.

Who do you consider to be the scum of our society today? Drug dealers? Terrorists who kill innocent people? Vandals who write graffiti on our fences?

Well, in Palestine when Jesus lived, if you asked the question "Who are the scum of society" the common answer would have been "tax collectors and sinners" this very phrase we have in today's reading.

Why were tax collectors the scum of society? First, they collected taxes which is enough to make you a bit unpopular. But second, they collected taxes for the Romans. Palestine was an occupied country. The Romans were the invaders. The enemies. And tax collectors worked for the enemy. They were traitors. Associating with this scum would have been like sitting down with a Nazi collaborator in World War 2.

Third, they were thieves. The Romans didn't care how much tax these collectors collected, as long as they got their levy. If the Romans wanted 5 shekels, the tax collector might try to extort 10 shekels. Or maybe a hundred. The profit went straight into their own pockets. It was a form of institutionalised extortion.

The religious authorities declared tax collectors as unclean. That meant they were not permitted to enter the synagogue or temple. They were as Unchurched as a person could be.

And what a signal Jesus sends! He asks this most Unchurched of the Unchurched to come into his inner circle as permanent member.

And worse, Jesus then goes with Matthew-Levi to his house, a house no doubt paid for by money robbed from other Palestinians, and has a big dinner. And who is at the dinner? Matthew-Levi's friends. Who are? Yup. Tax collectors and sinners.

The message might not be clear to us today, but it was like an earthquake to the religious people of Jesus' time. This was all wrong. Jesus was spending time with the Unchurched.

When I read the Gospel accounts of Jesus ministry, that is what I see. Hardly any time spent in church. Lots of time spent with the Unchurched. Isn't this something we should notice?

Which brings me to my second point. My second point of three points, by the way.

**Second point. One of the reasons we Christians have difficulty in relating to the unchurched, is because we have been too thoroughly churchd.**

Now I think I have invented a new word here. It seems to me that if a person who does not go to a church can be described as *unchurched* then a person who does go to a church can be described as *churchd*.

Too many of us in the church, have been too thoroughly churchd. We have grown up in the church. Our friends are in the church. Maybe we went to church schools. We married people within the church. We socialise with people in the church. We express our gifts in the church.

And not just in the church, but very often in just one church. One church in one suburb.

For most of us this has been a very satisfying experience. We are comfortable and at home being churchd people. God is good to us here, in the church. We want others to experience the joy of community or, to use a word you never hear outside of the church, fellowship.

Because we like it so much in here in the church, we want to invite others in. We see evangelism mostly as inviting the unchurched *into* the church. So we try to copy the world to make the church look more attractive to the unchurched. We provide community services so that the unchurched will come into the church and experience the joy of our fellowship.

There is only one thing wrong with this strategy. Well maybe two things, because it doesn't work very well.

But the most obvious thing that is wrong with this strategy is that it's not what Jesus would do.

If we look to Jesus as our model for ministry we note that while he did go to church, or at least to the equivalent place of worship in his time, he did not see it as a place for evangelism.

Instead of inviting people in, he took his message out. Jesus went where the people were. He walked right up to the office of the tax collector and said "Follow me."

And they got up and followed him.

Where did they follow him to? Back into the church? No. They followed him to dinner. Dinner with the bad people. Dinner with the down and outs. Dinner with the sinners.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying there is something bad about being in the four walls of the church building. Jesus did go to church. I am not saying we should not be a joyous and caring community. I am not saying we should not socialise together.

But I am saying that this is not the reason the church exists. It is merely a by-product.

The church may feel like a club, but that is not why the church exists. And if the reason we come here is only to enjoy the club, the fellowship, we are making the church into nothing more than a social club.

And that brings me to my third point. My third point of three points.

**Third point. The role of the Christian in relation to the unchurched is to be the presence of God.**

If the church does not exist just to be a club of the churched people, why does it exist? What is it that the church can provide that nothing else can?

The only thing the church can provide that no-one else can is a life-changing, practical encounter – and an ongoing relationship – with the living God and with people transformed by similar encounters.

Our role is to be the presence of God in the world.

One commentator has written, “this does not mean *inviting Jesus into your heart*, it does mean feeling a sense of God's presence and feeling that one has encountered God within the church.”

Have you encountered God here today? If the answer is NO, then this worship service has failed you. And those of us who construct these weekly events are failing in our responsibilities.

Most places we look in Australia today we see a dying church. Fewer and fewer people go to church.

Yet, some churches are growing. Are they onto something?

Well, one has to say that an analysis of church growth in Australia is beyond my ability this morning. But I do think one of the factors is that churches that give people some sense of the presence of God are onto something.

I have certainly experienced God's presence in some Charismatic worship services. But also I recall similar Divine encounters in other places. During the wonderful chanting in a Romanian Orthodox service in Bucharest. Prayerfully and quietly taking Holy Communion with the priest and one other parishioner in the Anglican Church in Copenhagen. Listening to a splendid organist playing Bach in the Augustinian church in Vienna. Indeed, it is worth commenting that this was during a recital, not during an organised church service.

There was something other-worldly about these experiences. And, of course, any encounter with God must be other-worldly. If our worship services are simply attempts to out-produce modern television or films, well, what's the point? The church is never going to effectively compete with what the world has to offer.

Maybe forty years ago it may have been possible to compete effectively with the world. I know in my youth we tried really hard. Following the Sunbury Rock Festival, a group of Christian young people that Judy and I were part of, put together a similar show in the Gold Coast. We had a great time. Not sure anyone encountered God there.

But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is no chance the church can compete with the world. Instead we need to understand the main reason we are here.

Not to provide a Sunday morning club for the insiders, but to create an environment that opens us up to God's presence.

Not to run play groups so that people are introduced to the church community, but so that they may have a personal encounter with God.

Not to have social events so that we can enjoy each other's company, but so that God may be present in ways we can each feel in the depths of our being.

But more than that we need to unchurch ourselves. We need to get out of the church and be the presence of God among the unchurched.

More than we need modern Christian songs, we need Christians whose songs are on the commercial radio playlists.

More than Christian magazines, we need Christians who live and work and write in mainstream television and news.

More than Christians in the church on Sunday, we need them out among the unchurched – at the footy, in the shopping centres, in business, in the life of the unchurched.

I remember soon after we started attending St Paul's I was introduced to an intense looking fellow who was a Primary School Principal. I discovered his name was Brian Allen and that he was then the Principal of Great Ryrie Primary School.

I was just trying to keep the conversation going when I asked, "Have you ever thought of being Principal of a Christian School?"

Brian replied with all the gentleness of a Road Grader.

"Why would I want to do that?"

I quickly discovered that Brian thought Christians were more use in the State School system than hived off into private education.

Yes, our calling is to the unchurched.

Now if I were Ken, I would now be able to give you ten helpful hints on how to be the presence of God among the unchurched. But as I am not Vic Maddick, I am also not Ken Holt.

The best I can do is to encourage us to apply the maxim "What would Jesus do?" in every circumstance. The more we try to emulate Jesus in the world, the more we shall become a channel for the Holy Spirit to encounter the unchurched.

And so I am now able to complete my address by reminding you of my three points.

First point. Jesus seems to have spent most of his ministry among the unchurched. Maybe we should too.

Second point. One of the reasons we Christians have difficulty in relating to the unchurched, is because we have been too thoroughly church-ed.

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