

Keeping Evangelism Front and Central
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Colossians 1v28-29: *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

The story is told about a prosperous, young investment banker who was driving his brand new BMW on a narrow winding hill road during a snow storm. On a sharp bend, he lost control and began sliding off the road towards a steep embankment. At the last moment he unbuckled his seat belt, flung open his door, and leaped from the car, which then plummeted over the edge and burst into flames. Although he had escaped with his life, the man suffered a ghastly injury. Somehow his arm had been caught near the hinge of the door as he jumped and had been torn off at the shoulder.

Luckily someone saw the accident and stopped to help. He found the banker standing at the roadside, looking down at the BMW engulfed in flames below the road. Incredibly it seemed the banker was oblivious to his injury. He was moaning, "My BMW! My new BMW!" The other motorist pointed at the banker's shoulder and said, "You've got bigger problems than that car. We've got to find your arm. Maybe the surgeons can sew it back on!" The banker looked at where his arm had been. He paused a moment, and began groaning, "Oh no! My Rolex! My new Rolex!"

It is vital that we keep the main thing the main thing [x2]

It's so easy to get distracted, isn't it? It's so easy to miss the wood for the trees. There are so many things to do. There are so many competing demands for our time, our energy, our prayers. There are meetings to run, buildings to maintain, committees to sit on, money to be raised, events to be organised, rotas to be juggled. It's so tempting to focus on the nuts and bolts and details and structures and programmes and to miss what we're meant to be about - the main thing.

But the main thing is what we get in these two verses at the end of Colossians 1. Derek Tidball says this "Here is a nutshell is Paul's view of ministry. Condensed in these two verses are the message, method, manner, motive and means of Christian ministry."

Here's what it's about - here's what we should be about. Here is a concise summary by Paul of what authentic apostolic Christian ministry looks like. This was Paul's aim - his goal - his task - the one thing he did. And it is the touchstone of all Christian life and service and ministry. Here's the main thing.

And it's worth reminding ourselves, we don't get to choose what the main thing is. The main thing is a task that has been assigned to us. Now - yes - as individual local churches we have to discern how the Lord is calling us to pursue this main thing. We have to work out the unique way that God is calling our local gathering - with all its particular gifts and flaws and wounds and wiring - we'll have to work out how to pursue this main thing. in our context. But we don't get to choose what the main thing is.

And what is the main thing? **We proclaim Christ.**

We don't proclaim clever human insights. We do not proclaim self-improvement or stress management or life balance or career enhancement. We do not proclaim a system of beliefs. We don't proclaim myths and legends. We do not proclaim a political agenda. We do not proclaim a set of traditions. We proclaim Christ. It's all about him.

John Wesley in his *Journals* often summarised his preaching in a particular town or village with the words, "I offered them Christ."

We are consciously and deliberately Christ-centred. Not numbers-centred; not reputation-centred; not institution-centred; not ethical issue-centred; not social action-centred; nor burning issues of the day-centred; but Christ-centred.

And we proclaim Christ because he is v15, **the image of the invisible God**. Because v16, **all things were created through him and for him**. Because v17, **he is before all things, and in him all things hold together**. We proclaim Christ because v18, **he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead**; Because v19, **in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell**. Because v20, all things are reconciled through him.

So the Lord Jesus Christ is the drag in to live out It's all about him. And so we are betting the farm, staking everything, devoting ourselves fully to the crucified carpenter of Nazareth, We proclaim him.

And just in case you're thinking that, since this is about proclamation, this is not about you - you're not the pastor or the vicar or a person who preaches, look down to 3v16. Paul is writing about Christian gatherings and he uses the same words he uses in 1v28: he talks about warning (or admonishing - same word) and teaching with all wisdom, **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom**. Notice it is something we're all to do to one another, so that the word of Christ, the teaching of Jesus takes root richly, deeply, meaningfully amongst us.

It's all about Jesus and proclaiming him - to one another and to the world.

Now I know that we know this [x2].

But I also know that there are so many pressures and distractions in local church ministry that overtake and sideline proclaiming Christ. We may not want them to dominate. We may be routinely frustrated by minor matters that intrude or diversions that appear along the way. We may have endlessly good intentions about the focus of our time and energy and money and resources. But we all know the reality is messier. Ministry is complicated and a constant juggling act.

So this session about keeping evangelism front and central - and it's really a note to myself and an encouragement to me to stay focussed - to keep the main thing the main thing.

One of the privileges of living in Fowey is the opportunity to sail. Kenneth Graham, the author of *Wind in the Willows*, was married in Fowey Church and you can see facsimiles of the letters to his

son in the lobby of the Fowey Hotel which have the beginnings of his story about Ratty and Mole. and Toad. And so I have to agree with the Water Rat: *"There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats ... or with boats. In or out of 'em, it doesn't matter."*

But sailing in a tidal river certainly presents its challenges. Not least when you're racing towards a mark with the tide running across you, you are constantly adjusting your heading. You may have started out in exactly the right direction, but if you don't keep refocussing, the current will have taken you way off course.

So I know that we know this. But I trust it might be helpful to tweak the tiller again.

So what I'd like to do is share something of our story at Fowey and the mistakes we have made, the realisations we've come to, the journey we've been on - our rather zig zag path in trying to keep evangelism front and central. None of it is rocket science. I am sure many of these things you will have grasped way before I did. And if nothing else that may be encouragement enough. If those bozos in Fowey are only just waking up to this or that, then we're doing alright.

So keeping evangelism front and central. And the 1st realisation is that **We are in a missionary situation.** [x2] I told you it's not rocket science.

Cristina Odone is a journalist. Former editor of the Catholic Herald, now deputy editor of the New Statesman, she is a regular columnist for the Telegraph. Back in October she wrote a piece called: *No place for Jesus in RE but there's always Ghandi*

"Jesus is being sidelined, and His teachings with Him... Christianity was once the lingua franca in the West. Today, it is as exotic as Shiva, Ganesha and Kali, of Gandhi's Hindu faith. Sadly, ignorance often feeds hostility. Grown-ups unschooled in the basics of their religion – the catechism, say, or the parables of the New Testament – are suspicious of its influence. Their discomfort grows with talk, now unfamiliar, of sin and Judgment Day.

Jesus may be hailed as meek and mild, but his message sounds scary to an audience used to the comforting tut-tuts of their shrink, or the happy pill sold by their GP. Far easier to quash such disturbing talk and banish the trouble-makers. Or, at least, warn them not to pipe up in public with their puritanical notions.... Religion [has] become a secret pastime to practise behind closed doors... [and] the state... [only] pays lip service to freedom of conscience."

I cannot imagine that being written 20 years ago when I was first ordained. I cannot imagine that being written 12 years ago when I became vicar of Fowey. Things have changed. And changed faster and quicker and deeper than I think any of us have really grasped. At least, for me, but I suspect for many of us.

Back in the 90s who'd have thought that a previous Archbishop of Canterbury - George Carey - would think it worthwhile to launch a nationwide 'Not ashamed' campaign in the run up to Christmas 2010, so concerned would he be about the attempt to 'airbrush' the Christian faith out of national life.

And the concern is real. Just one example - Judge Sir James Munby, who is the president of the family division is on record insisting that religious beliefs are not the business of the courts and

that judges must take an essentially neutral view. He said, *"Once upon a time, the perceived function of the judges was to promote virtue and discourage vice and immorality... Happily for us the days are past when the business of judges was the enforcement of morals or religious beliefs."*

We may not like it, but Britain is now a plural multicultural secular society. Christendom has died. And to all intents and purposes "established" religion is a practical irrelevance to at least 95% of the population.

Something the British Humanist Association is quick to trumpet. Commenting on Church of England statistics last May, the BHA concluded *"the majority of people do not engage in religious practice, nor have religious beliefs, nor a religious identity."*

Now, we might say that's overstating it, and our experience in Fowey, I guess in common with many rural areas, is that there is still a lingering attachment to the vestiges of Christian faith, not least in rites of passages, but for how much longer we don't know. Certainly there's steady erosion of what we used to call 'folk religion', so whereas, back in 2002, when I heard that someone in the town had died, I would expect a call from the undertaker, I would estimate that now it's about a 50/50 call.

And that's backed up by the 2011 census. In 2001 72% self identified as Christian, but 2011 that had dropped to 59% with those self-labelling as no religion rose from 15 to 25%.

And those shifts are only going to accelerate. In the mainstream denominations the majority of congregations are ageing and declining. I am told the average age of a C of E congregation across the country on a Sunday is now 66. And in rural areas I guess it's higher. Christendom has died.

So we are in a missionary situation. Have we really grasped this? Or are still hankering for the past - often an imagined past? Where are our energies and prayers and resources going? Propping up the crumbling edifice or making the most of the evangelistic opportunity that lies before us?

We are ministering on the back of 150 years of Christian decline in this country with all the cultural and social consequences. But... That is where the Lord has providentially put us. Christendom is dead. Denominations are dying. But 95% of the UK is hell bound.

That's why gospel partnerships are so vital - local churches working together to do more than we can on our own to proclaim Christ.

So my first realisation is that we are in a missionary situation and that needs more and more to shape my approach to ministry. We are all missionaries to an essentially non-Christian country.

My 2nd realisation then is that **our strategies need to change**. [x2]

Again, I am sure that this is obvious. But of course it's easier to keep doing what we've always done and then wondering why it's no longer working or not working as well as it used to.

I can't remember where I picked it up, but there is an adage that 'what you're converted by, is what you're converted to.' And there is wisdom in that. If your response to the gospel was

essentially an emotionally experiential one, then there is a temptation constantly to be looking for that buzz or that peace or that release over and over. Likewise if your response to the gospel was essentially an intellectual consent to a conceptual truth, then there is a temptation only to seek yet more insight. Now, yes, those are very broad brush generalisations, but you can discern those sorts of patterns, can't you?

And it's also true when we think about evangelistic method. If the means that the Lord used to bring you to new birth was a huge rally and a big name speaker, then at very least you will think fondly and positively of large scale events and big name - even celebrity - evangelists.

If we came to Christ in our teens perhaps through a camp ministry - CYFA, Campaigners, SU and the like - then we will naturally prioritise youth work in the forefront of a church's outreach and as the key to the growth of the gospel into the future.

If we were converted through a discovery course - Alpha or Christianity Explored - then we'll be waving the flag for our particular curriculum.

And if we just drifted into church, perhaps through a passing contact, and stayed and warmed to the truth over time, we won't understand why others don't do the same.

What we're converted by, is often what we're converted to - in method. But the context has changed. Our friends and work mates and neighbours are not where we were. They're in a different place. So why do we think that doing the same thing in the same way will engage them as it did us? The manner in which we proclaim Christ needs to change. The message doesn't change. But the strategy must.

Now over the last 20 years, undoubtedly the default strategy for many churches has been **Event plus group** [x2]

This has been the explicit MO of both Alpha and Christianity Explored. Essentially an attractive event, usually food with a speaker, but packaged in any number of different ways - a golf day with a bbq, a wine tasting, a gingerbread evening, a fashion show, a jazz night - all designed as an attractive invitation with, at some point, something low-key but stimulating and thought provoking to encourage people to think further and join the next course.

And sometimes those events have built on others without the gospel content which have simply been about building relationships. Sometimes those events have run alongside more presentational outsider oriented invitation Sundays, again designed to lead into the next Christianity Explored course.

And it a matter for great praise that this strategy has borne much fruit over the last 2 decades. But the changing scene is raising some issues.

One of the things I've noticed that most of those who come on a Christianity Explored are clergy contacts. And I think behind that lies my suspicion that very very few Christians feel that they can lead their friends to Jesus. They might just about be able to screw up the courage to invite them along to an event, but more than that, for example accompanying them on a exploration, let alone actually leading someone to Christ, that is something for the professionals.

And of course a dvd course reinforces that mentality - the professional does the talking, the persuading, the reasoning, the explaining. We just bring, they say, or least they don't say, but their actions do.

And bringing is a big ask - We're asking someone to set aside 7 or even 10 weeks to do the course. I understand that both CE and Alpha are saying it is harder and harder to get folk signed up.

And when they do, they are further back than ever before. We've found that often we need to run some just looking common question sessions before folk are ready for CE. One lady in our congregation did CE 3 times and Discipleship Explored twice before she finally understood grace.

And yes, we've done endless evangelism training, but still many of our folk feel unable to lead a friend to Christ.

We've also found that events take a huge amount of time and resources, often for little or no fruit. In particular, very meagre intended results, namely CE signups.

And that is compounded by the cringe factor - a great event, beautifully laid on, superbly executed, but then there is a crashing of gears into the talk. And no matter how carefully that is done, nonetheless many of our folk have found that to be really awkward and gauche.

Now I suspect part of the problem is that, yes, I may invite a friend to a curry night but I have never actually talked to them about my faith and the Lord Jesus. So when the talk comes at the end of the meal, it's like a bolt from the blue - where did that come from - the Christian is embarrassed and the non-Christian feels it. And so no-one really knows what to say afterwards, people slink off home and the gospel is never mentioned again.

Or you get the situation - which we have with a number of our friends who have got wise to the strategy, so they now ask 'Will there be a talk?' And if there is, they decline the invite. But then the pressure is to run the event without a talk. Surely it's better to get them through the door? We kid ourselves we're building the relationship. But there's no gospel going on.

And actually in Fowey, there is relationship aplenty. We don't need events to build community. We have community - in fact lots of them - it's that sort of place. It's not anonymous urban sprawl. People know each other. And they're good at doing things together - We've got 2 yacht clubs. There's a gig club, a rugby club, a senior and a junior football club. There's a pool league. There's the National Coastwatch, the lifeboat, the fire brigade. There's a WI, Fowey in Bloom, a camera club, the amblers, an amateur dramatics group, numerous book groups and on top of that 5 pubs with their quiz nights and bands - and that's before we mention the fund raisers - the Mission to Seafarers, the Lions, and any number of charity events. We don't need to create community. We just need to be out there in it.

And whilst that may be a little unusual, I guess that for most of us on the peninsula, community is something we are good at. Devon and Cornwall are famous for their welcome - we've built a tourist industry on the back of it. And we're used to an enfolded wave after wave of folk who'd moved down to enjoy something that much of the rest of the country has lost - community.

So we're in a missionary situation. Our strategies therefore need to change. So my 3rd realisation is actually **4 shifts of emphasis**.

Now you may disagree with these. In a sense I am flying a kite with each of these and the aim is to make us think about why we do what do in evangelism.

Here are the 4 shifts and then I'll try to explain what I mean and how we've learnt this along the way.

1. We need to shift **from professionals to partnership** (and we've learn this from John Dickson)
2. We need to shift **from drag in to live out** (and we've learn this from the LICC)
3. We need to shift **from dumbing down to upping the bar** (and we've learn this from Sydney diocese)
4. We need to shift **from gospel outlines to gospel reading** (and we're learnt this from uccf and from the city work at St Helens Bishopsgate)

[x2]

So shift 1 - We need to shift **from professionals to partnership**. And, as I said this is something we've learnt this John Dickson who is an Australian evangelist and author of amongst other titles, The Christ Files which is a brilliant dvd course on the historicity of the NT.

But this insight comes from a book called *Promoting the Gospel*, though I think it has been republished as '*The Best Kept Secret in Christian Mission*'

Dickson writes "*Perhaps the best kept secret of Christian mission is that the Bible lists a whole range of activities that promote Christ to the world and draw others to him. These include prayer, godly behaviour, financial assistance, the public praise of God (in church)... [as well as] answering people's questions. All of these are explicitly connected in the Bible with advancing the gospel and winning people to Christ. They are all "mission" activities, and only a couple of them involve the lips at all.*"

When many of our church members don't feel able to lead someone to Christ - and most don't have the spiritual gift to be an evangelist - Dickson very helpfully steps back from simply giving reason for the hope that we have, or being able to answer common apologetic questions, or having to repeat a set gospel outline or presentation. He pulls the focus back from telephoto to wide angle and helps us to see that whatever our gifting, whatever our temperament, whatever our personality, we all have a part to play in promoting the cause of Christ.

He demonstrates that the NT holds out a number of 'partnership activities' to which we are all called, things we can all and must all be involved be involved with, whether we're evangelists or not. And those activities are Praying, Giving, Serving, Living, Praising, and yes - Chatting. [x2]
Or less cryptically: prayer, godly behaviour, financial assistance, public praise, service to the community as well as talking about our faith.

So for those who are not confident about speaking and who are therefore made to feel inadequate or failures when it comes to evangelism, it give them a different grid to see how they

can be involved and that every facet of our lives can be used by God to promote the cause of Christ.

I think his perspective is wonderfully liberating and saves the shy and introvert or the practical-less-articulate types from the shed loads of guilt and self-consciousness that a course like Two Ways to Live can engender.

Without downplaying the speaking, the point is that we all have a part to play. There is a whole range of things that you can do in your everyday life that will promote the gospel and bring people to Christ. And understanding that and how I can play my part builds both ownership and partnership in evangelism. This is not something just for the gifted or the professional. We all have a part to play.

So just one example, and first and foremost, prayer. Not all of us will feel confident speaking to others about Jesus. But all of us can be confident in speaking to Jesus about others. So the first and most basic way of being involved, in being partners together in the cause of Christ, the most basic way of promoting the gospel together is to pray.

So shift 1 is trying to rescue evangelism from the specialists, from the keenies, from the professionals and to try to engender the widest partnership possible - every believer in the local church working together.

So we have taught this, we did a series called 'Partners together' and we looked, week by week, at each of the partnership activities that Dickson outlines, both in sermons and in small groups. And when I am talking with someone personally I now actively try to make the links between the things they're involved with and the way that promotes the cause of Christ so they can see it for themselves and own their part in it.

That's the 1st shift. The 2nd is the shift **from drag in to live out**

Mark Greene at The London Institute for Christianity produced a very helpful resource ten years ago called Imagine - Imagine how we can reach the UK. And it includes these 2 very helpful diagrams which we then labelled 'In the huddle' and out 'On the pitch'.

Greene's simple premises was that in 2003 approximately 7% of the population go to church once a month or more. Often we have a picture of the church as a ghetto, up against the ropes, on the margins and in a corner. And when you put all the red dots in a corner, it looks and feels marginalised and defensive and defeated.

But the reality is (perhaps with the exception of professional that is paid pastors) the majority of us are not in the huddle the majority of the time. We're out on the pitch, out there with scores of relationships. And out there everyone is a FTCW, a full time Christian worker.

So the question we ought to be asking is not how this person can serve in the church, in the gathering, but how does the Lord want to use them in the world - as yeast or leaven in the dough.

Now LICC have recently revamped this material into Frontline. And your Frontline is the place where you spend much or most of your time, the place where you meet people who don't know

Jesus, which is the place that God has put you and so it's a place of huge possibility and potential. Christians are exactly where they need to be to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

So here's a situation and an experience that you might have had: may be you've moved or moved churches. So you're new, just settling in and getting to know people and working out, yes, this is the people with whom I'd like to belong. And at some point, someone will come along and have a conversation that goes a little bit like this:

'We are delighted that you've chosen to become part of us, it's great that you're making relationships and you look so comfortable in the church.

But, we were just wondering [and they might struggle to finish this sentence, but they'll get there], we were just wondering how we might best use you? Have you ever been involved in children's work? What about young people? Do you play a musical instrument? Do you ever long to make coffee at the end of church? Or dreamt of cleaning the church hall when no one else is there?' And if you say, 'well actually none grabs' they'll say, '...well, you've got a nice smile; would you like to be part of the welcome team?'

Now of course being part of a family brings responsibility to play a part. Some of those jobs need to be done, and it's right that you do get involved. But what would a different conversation look like?

What if they said to you, 'we are delighted that you've joined us and we're so thrilled to have you - we were just wondering, where is God already using you and how can we best equip and encourage you there?' That would be a different conversation wouldn't it? That would be a conversation that says the game is out there, not in here. In here we huddle, as a team. It's where we get coached and equipped. But the real game is out on the pitch.

To use the analogy, I think most of think of church as the stadium where we come to watch the game, and watch the pros do their stuff. But this is different, isn't it?

The pros are the coaches. And we are all the players. Church is not a spectator sport but a training session - Now theologically, it is more than that - but stick with the analogy - And the game, the focus, is not the gathering on Sunday, but the rest of week wherever we may be.

So we use the phrase distinctive and attractive a lot. That's what we want to be. So we've been deliberately teaching what that will look like. In the last 3 years we've had major sermons series on the fruits of the spirit and the beatitudes. We are currently teaching on Titus. All the time encouraging folk to live in a way that stands out and shines out..

But we have also deliberately reduced the number of evangelistic events that we lay on. We want to encourage folk to be out there on the pitch, playing the game - involved, building those friendships wherever they find themselves, living for Jesus and speaking for Jesus.

It's a big shift from drag in to live out. And it's a hard one. Partly because the church is a hungry beast - it takes a lot just to keep things ticking over in terms of people and energy and time. But also because it appears that there is less going on. And at one level, there is - there are less events.

But reinforcing this shift time and again, hopefully there is more going on. As guys go running together and their non Christian mates talk to them about '12 years a slave' which they've just seen, and what's all that about. Or as folk intentionally get involved in the WI or Fowey in Bloom and the Christians are conspicuous by their lack of gossip or by their real concern.

So the shift from drag in to live out. The 3rd shift is perhaps a little counter intuitive. When people are further and further back from coming to faith, the logical approach might appear to be to make things more accessible, more seeker-sensitive, simpler and less complicated.

But the 3rd shift is ***from dumbing down to upping the bar***. Now I know you can be accessible without downgrading. And the way I've described the shift is perhaps a little unhelpful. This is about being compelling.

And we've been learning this from some research in the Sydney diocese, who after 10 years with a clear plan and vision for growth were asking 'Why haven't we grown?' or at least why is the growth so slow that it's only just keeping pace with population. The findings were summarised in the Briefing in August 2011.

What they found is that people are not necessarily hostile to Christianity or churchgoing, even if actual attendance is seen as unnecessary. Nonetheless, if you take a church with an average of 100 on a Sunday, they found that generally, 80 will be regular 'weekly attenders', and 20 will be fringe or infrequent attenders. And those 20 will be drawn from a group of about 40 monthly attenders and 280 less frequent attenders or one-offs. In addition another 600 will attend some special service during the year, baptism, wedding, or funeral.

When we thought about this as a PCC, we reckoned that was about right, except that we probably had 3 times that in special services through the year.

In other words, there is still a great opportunity with those on the fringe. And we need to make the most of it while it lasts. But the Sydney research made the point that it was then both extraordinary and disappointing that so few of those fringe found reasons to stay or become more regular. And they identified 3 reasons. The first of which was that the content and presentation of our church gatherings are not sufficiently compelling.

42% of non/infrequent attenders said that their main reason for not going to church is that the services are "boring or unfulfilling' - and that came ahead of not agreeing with beliefs or moral values.

So the numbers suggest that, for the moment at least, the church gathering is still a good place for gospel growth, but we need to be very careful not to be dumbing down to be more immediately appealing. In fact the reverse is what is required, a deep engagement with God in his word and in prayer. That our gatherings need to serve up something substantial, compelling, worth getting out bed for. In other words, 'serious' church.

So not to be afraid of teaching the Bible at depth, with careful exposition and hard hitting application.

The cost of becoming a Christian is getting steeper and steeper. So if someone is to repent and put their trust in Lord Jesus Christ and come under his rule, they need rock solid reasons, a consistent and cohesive worldview, a holistic and credible vision of life.

Now we know the gospel is that. Jesus offers life in all its fullness. The Bible makes sense of world and life and the myriad of issues we face. And we don't need to apologise for that or be forced onto the back foot. But we do need to proclaim Christ compellingly.

To use a sales analogy, we are not a 99p shop or Poundland. What we have to offer is the pearl of great price and so we need to demonstrate that with depth and conviction. Church members need to know that their faith makes sense and to be captured by the beauty of Jesus. More than anything else this is the motivator for evangelism.

Last, a shift **from gospel outlines to gospel reading** [x2]

Much of our evangelism training has been about teaching a simple outline that can be repeated - The Roman Road, The Bridge to Life, Do vs Done, Two ways to live and so on. The danger is that it can lead to dump and run. trying to say too much, or just robotically repeating the outline. It's like a pre-programmed message inserted into a normal conversation. It's just odd.

Again John Dickson is very helpful here with something he calls 'Gospel Bites'. Finding a point of contact in the gospels, retelling the story to address an issue or a question, but only just enough to suggest that the other person reads an account of Jesus' life for themselves. That's where you want to get them to.

In other words, letting the gospels tell the gospel. This why I prefer Christianity Explored to Alpha. Alpha takes a systematic approach, topic by topic, and indeed it grew out of a summer camp talk outline. CE gets you to walk through Mark's Gospel and encounter Jesus as he strides off the page.

Now I want to suggest that the NT actually points us in this direction. Not least because the message of salvation, the 'gospel', has a lot to do with the story of Jesus Christ. Now that may sound obvious, but think about the implications.

Jesus said that gospel preaching would, to some extent, include the retelling of individual stories from his life such the woman who anointed him at Simon the Leper's house in Matthew 26, "**Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.**"

Mark opens his retelling of Jesus' life and death and resurrection by explicitly saying this is "**The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**"

And we find right through the NT short summaries of the gospel - some perhaps designed to be sung or said or memorised. And what is striking is that they are virtually 'plot summaries' of the account of Jesus' life. I given you 3 references on the handout - Romans 1v2-4 / 1 Corinthians 15v1-5 / 2 Timothy 2v8

Or if you follow the first gospel talks through Acts - Luke gives us brief outlines those talks - again and again they involve a retelling of Jesus' birth, miracles, teaching, arrest, death, resurrection, and appearances before they go on to explain the significance of those events in terms of Christ's *lordship* and the offer of *forgiveness*. Again on the handout: Acts 2v22-40 / 10v34-43 / 13v16-39.

So instead of 2, 3,4 or 6 point presentation, I want to suggest that the gospel involves a retelling of the events of Jesus' life (especially those of his death and resurrection) which shows him to be God's saving-leader and offers forgiveness to all who entrust their lives to him. In other words, the gospels tell the gospel.

Now this why reading a gospel one to one can be so effective evangelistically. It's what they were designed to do. So we've been learning from Uccf and their Uncover initiative, and from St Helen's Bishopsgate and their Word One to One initiative. This has been our big push over the last 2 years. It's been slow, but it gaining traction as more and more stories emerge of people doing this, being surprised that they can and being thrilled at what the Holy Spirit is doing through his word.

In some recent research in the States, people were asked if they would be willing to read the bible with a friend if asked. Amazingly 61% of 20-somethings said 'yes' and 42% of those aged 30 and above. So at least 2 out of every 5 people we know might be willing to look at a gospel with us.

Now the great thing about reading a gospel one to one with a unbeliever is that they are constantly exposed to Jesus. So we're not giving them abstractions or concepts, but they're coming face to face with the Lord - see how he behaves at a funeral, see how he restores a widow's son to her, see how he interacts with prostitutes, he heals a paralysed man, but not before he has met his more pressing need and so he forgives him. We see his power. We see his compassion. He is amazingly attractive. Of course, he is uncomfortable. Of course there is an element of depart from me. Of course there is a sense that my life is shabby. But he is wonderfully, wonderfully attractive.

And the great thing is that anyone can do this. Just like a book group, anyone can get together with a friend and talk about the text. You don't need leaders manuals or special training. We just need to encourage people that they could have a go and inspire them to want to have a go.

The great thing about both the *Uncover* resources and the *Word One to One* resources is that everything is there on the page. So you and your non-Christian friend are on the same level. They have what you have. So it's about discovering and exploring and discussing together. It's not didactic. It's just 2 people sitting together with a gospel. It's not preachy. It's just conversational. We're vulnerable. And Jesus strides off the page.

Perhaps it's worth reminding ourselves that when the gospel first came to our shores it was Roman traders and artisans who came to the illiterate Britons and told them the stories of Jesus. They shared what they knew - yes it was imperfect - there was a mix of heresy with it, but we heard the gospel.

During the Reformation it was largely a popular movement in the UK as people read the gospels together - traders from continent bringing copies of Tyndale's translation. It doesn't have to be the professionals. Anyone can do this.

Let me conclude then by coming back to the rapidly changing context.

There are just a few signs, a few straws in the wind that our freedom of speech and our freedom to gather is under threat. I don't want to be melodramatic, but it doesn't take a lot of imagination to think that perhaps one day people who preach the gospel, people who proclaim Christ could find ourselves in a place like Exeter jail.

So imagine if the government did shut us down - no more organised religion, no more church meetings, no more bible studies, no more sunday school - how would we share the gospel with the people of Cornwall and Devon.

Well if you think about it, not everything would change. We'd still have the bible. We'd still have the gospel. We'd still have the God-given responsibility to prayerfully share the gospel with our friends with our work mates with those who live in our village or street.

But instead of inviting them to events like a pub quiz or a jazz night or a CE in a local pub or coffee shop, we might just ask them one simple question - Would you like to read the bible with me? Or we might give someone a gospel and say, 'Have a read of this and let's meet and talk about it - I'd love to know what you think.'

God-willing we're not going to be closed down, not yet.

But instead of always relying on inviting people to events I want to equip our church family so that if that day does come we are able to just keep going because we're already doing what we need to do.

Everyone involved, living breathing shop windows for the transforming truth of Christ, taking the opportunities wherever they are to let the gospels tell the gospel so that others come face to face with the compelling beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ and turn to him as their Lord and trust him as their Saviour.