

“Journeying together for the walk is long” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the First Sunday of Lent, 21 February 2021.

Imagine after worship you cross the road for a coffee. And a person you know, but not well, is standing in the line for coffee behind you and says something like ... Did I see you come out of Knox Church just now? What is Church about?

Or imagine an old friend who is going through a tough time, whose assumptions are being questioned and who is wondering about faith, and you are having a cup of tea together and she surprises you by saying – you go to Church – What is Christianity about?

Or imagine a person here this morning and to whom you have been friendly as Knox people are, happens to mention that this is the first time they have been to a regular church service and they say to you – Well, that was interesting. What is this really about?

Or imagine a person where you work or where you study happens to know that you sometimes participate in Knox Church and they say to you – I am really fed up with religious bigots. What do you think of the Christian faith?

Now, of course, people rarely get to the question in just one or two steps, but they may get to the question in a few steps.

And one of the thrilling aspects about Knox is that people who have come to study or work in Dunedin are often exploring alternative ways of viewing the world. They turn up at Knox on a Sunday just wondering what Christianity is about and whether it might be an option.

What are we going to say?

Of course there is no prescribed set of words. And much depends on the context and tone of what people ask and our relationship with them. Often we would want to involve people in a longer conversation so we sense a connecting point.

For seven years until I came here, I was part of an agency that had an office on the tenth floor of an office block in the middle of Sydney. On the floors beneath there were businesses of all kind. It was clear from the noticeboard on the ground floor that our agency was the main one on the tenth floor, so when I got in the lift and pressed the button for the tenth floor, people who had worked in the building for a while had an idea of who I worked for. And every now and again, someone would ask – O you work for UnitingWorld. Yes. What do you do? And then I had a three or four floors to

answer, sometimes in the confines of the lift with other people overhearing the conversation. The first time I was asked, it threw me because I hadn't worked out what to say, so I muddled through. In speaking with my colleagues, I learned that all of us had been asked the same question. Many times. So at our annual retreat we talked together about what we could say, and we practised it, helping each other in the process, and we did it every year, because we wanted what we said to be true to who we were as an organisation and true to us and also engaging. We realised how important those words were, because our organisation relied entirely on the good will of others.

What we say in those moments is popularly called elevator spiel.

What can we say that is genuine, that is true to the church and true to us?

Mark's elevator spiel seems to be this. Jesus says "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; change your mind and believe in the good news."

Let's lift from that sentence ideas that might be central to what we would want to say to someone today.

Notice, it is good news. Not the caricatured soap box preacher saying – The End is Nigh. Save yourself from Hell. Actually, I don't think I have ever heard those words. Sometimes we have done a good job in making the good news sound bad.

I friend shifted cities and attended a local church for the first time. It seemed evident she was a visitor so at morning tea one of the local people came up and started the conversation with something like "It's all metaphorical you know. We are not literalists here. We don't think all that actually happened." That person started with what that congregation didn't believe. Perhaps not the best place to start.

And not everyone is actually asking a question. The great US preacher of the twentieth century, George Buttrick, describes a brief conversation on an aeroplane.

As he sat there, he had a legal pad out on which he was furiously scribbling some notes for his sermon the coming Sunday. The man next to Buttrick inquired, "Say, what are you working on there?"

"My sermon for Sunday--I'm a Christian preacher."

"Oh," the other man replied. "Well, I don't like to get caught up in the complexities of religion. I like to keep it simple. You know, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' The Golden Rule. That's my religion!"

"I see," Rev. Buttrick replied, "and what do you do for a living?"

"I'm an astronomer. I teach astrophysics at a university."

"Ah, yes, astronomy," Buttrick shot back.

"Well, I don't like to get caught up in the complexities of science. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.' That's my astronomy. Who could ever need more than that, eh?"

But if the question is genuine, what is the good news?

There is in the gospel today a central idea – the idea of the reign of God or the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, but not in some far off place or far off time.

The reign of God embodied in the life of Jesus. And what is that reign? It is the world as God intends it to be. It is the flourishing of creation, the thriving of human life. Where no one dies of hunger or thirst. Where every child is cherished. The good news is that God is at work now to bring that new world.

What does Knox exist for? It exists to be part of God's reign on earth, to share in it, to embody it, and to point to it.

So how do we become part of that reign?

The word repent may be better understood as "let your mind be blown wide open." Or "let your life be transformed". The world God envisages is so startling it blows our mind open and it changes how we live and what we live for.

And the second word – believe, not believe in certain doctrines, but trust. Not intellectualise, but live into. Not explain, but experience. Trust that the new world is possible, trust that the world Jesus embodies is what this world needs, trust that this is the world God is bringing. Let your mind be blown open and trust in that reign.

What does Knox exist for? It exists to enable people to experience and have their mind blown open by a transformational vision for our world, such that they choose to live into it.

The verbs are plural not singular.

So it might be more true to say that Knox exists to enable groups of people to be part of a community that experiences and has their minds blown open by a transformational vision for our world, such that they choose to embody it themselves.

And the mind-blowing nature of the reign of God is such that we always have more to experience and live into.

Some know it primarily as justice and peace. Some know it primarily as healing and forgiveness. Some know it primarily as acceptance and love. Wherever we start, we are being led into what is deeper and more expansive. The length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God. Expanding. Growing.

The Christian season of Lent which we have now embarked on highlights the challenges of the journey, not least because it takes us over about 40 days to Easter. A community of people, encouraging each other to live into the reign of God so disturbing to the status quo that Jesus must be killed.

In Lent we are led into a deeper experience of the more, all the way to resurrection.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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