

Responding to Human Need

When normally complacent and “together” people discover that they have needs, they often don’t know that they can turn to God and the Christian community for friendship and answers, or they can’t see the connection. If our Christianity is to be relevant, it must touch people where they are living. It must be infectious.

What happened in your neighbourhood last Sunday?

Going to church is not the first thing that springs to most people’s minds on Sunday mornings, even when facing problems. Or any time, for that matter (apart from weddings and funerals, and even that is occurring less than it used to in the West).

Take last Sunday, for example. In my culture, some Dads and Mums slept in or lay in bed reading the newspaper while the kids (not necessarily from the same marriage) got up and turned on the cartoons or logged onto the Internet to play games. Breakfast followed, either together or separately, depending on what Saturday night was like. Some children went to McDonalds, perhaps with a non-custodial parent. After breakfast, Dad mowed the lawn or washed the car while Mum put through a load or washing and reminded the children to empty the dishwasher and complete their homework. When they were finished, a few kids washed their dogs or took them for walks. Others cycled to the park or met friends at the local playground. Mum drove to the shopping centre (regardless of the actual distance from the home). Then Dad took the family to the beach. After lunch a few drove to the oval to watch a football game (“the footy”); others saw the re-play on television later in the day. The afternoon finished with a BBQ and preparations to go back to work or school on Monday. With the kids ensconced in bed Dad and Mum turned on the TV, saw snapshots about people doing terrible things to one another, sighed at platitudes from a politician and watched a thriller before going to bed.

Oh yes, a few people also went to church. (Next year the number, as a proportion of the population who do so, could well be less.) In some cases, the neighbours went to the mosque and heard an inspirational message or denunciation by the mufti or sheikh.

Why didn’t most people go to church? Why should they? If asked, some of them would have said they didn’t feel like it. Others would have reported that with work schedules increasing they valued their family moments (or time out with serial families) and didn’t want to waste precious hours attending Victorian-style ceremonies they didn’t really understand, for objectives to which they did not subscribe, to worship a God they did not believe in or could not see. For postmodernists, “church” has fallen out of style and they are simply not inclined to go to there without a good reason. “I’m not religious”. “I go at Christmas; that’s enough”. The assumption is that church is only relevant for people who “need it”. Like the first aid kit, it is best left locked up until someone injures themselves.

And locked-up most churches are; people needing help, counsel, prayer, answers and support during the week often encounter closed doors and are obliged to wait until the next advertised service (“All Welcome”).

The majority of people feel self-conscious about walking into church building uninvited. A friend told me she went to a church service for the first time in years and, when she got there, no one said "Hello". She felt awkward and out of place, standing alone, wondering what to do next. Everyone seemed to know other people. They gave the impression they knew exactly what was going on. This made her sense of isolation more acute. "I stood out." Without a good reason to stay she waited around only as long as she felt it was polite to do so, then beat a hasty retreat. No one noticed when she arrived. Probably no one saw her depart. Their equanimity was undisturbed.

It goes without saying that few people will return to a church fellowship if they do not make several friends quickly. If they take the initiative and make an approach, they are never sure what the response will be, so (in the end) they opt for caution and decide not to make themselves vulnerable. Why make matters worse?

Everyone has needs

"Ordinary" people have complex and deeply felt needs. It is important that they hear from other ordinary people why they are Christians, and why they believe in God. Ordinary people experience stresses, have mortgages, and have moments when they know they aren't coping, when what they have is inadequate. For all our efforts and bonhomie, things often don't work out as we wish. Blame the environment, parents, politicians, hormones, childhood trauma, the Devil ("He made me do it"), Irish people, Muslims, the media, global warming, or the Internet. Blaming others enables us to say that "we can't help it" and somehow shift responsibility. However, the blame game doesn't improve our inner resources to deal with what is going on.

Take the true story of the English couple who decided (at the height of the Cold War) that living in Europe posed unacceptable threats to their children growing up well-adjusted and free from the possibility of contamination as a result of nuclear war or accidents. One day they scanned the atlas in an effort to find the least complicated, safest place on earth in which to live. When they had made their decision they sold up, transferred their money abroad, said good bye to extended family members and set off. They arrived in Stanley, the capital and only town of the Falkland Islands, just before General Leopoldo Galitieri, the President of Argentina sent in the first wave of troops to occupy the islands (subject of a long-standing dispute with the UK), provoking a short but disastrous war. Weeks later, I watched a victory parade organised by the UK Government in London and contemplated the lot of those who seek solutions and occasionally find themselves worse off than when they started.

Consider the hassles that people around us face (in varying degrees) and for which they seek to answers: loneliness; boredom; anomie; emptiness; guilt; rejection by parents, friends, spouses, children and colleagues; low self esteem; anger about circumstances and people; feelings of failure and blame; hurts from other people; unrealized hopes; bitterness; loss of control; unemployment; sickness; confusion, betrayal; and uncertainty about the future. In some countries these are compounded by war; hunger; disease; break-down of society; social injustice; genocide; prejudice and natural disasters. Many of these hassles are invisible to the neighbours ("We want our privacy"), but they are just as real as it they weren't covered up.

The solutions appear to be no better. Those who are bored spend more time watching depressing television shows or hanging out with other bored people. Drugs are increasingly sophisticated. Those with academic interests discover that Rationalism is not so rational after all and that so-called Positivism is fundamentally pretty negative and doesn't offer any panaceas. People interested in spiritual things, but disaffected by churches, turn to the cults; some end up in the occult, witchcraft and New Age groups. Gymnasts are seized on by those seeking solutions. I saw one advertisement that offered a week in Australia's Hayman Island, which is part of the Great Barrier Reef. Everything was included, nice accommodation, meals, air-conditioning, white sand and days lounging by the pool. The package was called the "Marriage Saver". Politicians discover, to their chagrin, that people don't turn to them for viable answers; they score less than 1% on most trust indicators.

Finally, some go to church, where they hear people singing hymns like, "I've wrestled on toward heaven, through earth and wind and tide". Sounds like escapism. Is this all Christianity has to offer? More striving?

God's solutions

Men and women need to be given the capacity to change, to be renewed from the inside out and to start all over again.

Jesus came into the world to reveal a loving, caring, present God. He died on the cross to secure forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. He sent the Holy Spirit to give us power to face life. He gives us a new beginning and a profound sense of hope. He offers true and clear guidance from His Word. He accepts us, makes us His children and gives us brand new identities and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), so that the change we experience is tangible. He tells us who we are: His children, chosen for a purpose, made in His image, able to enjoy Him and receive His love. That's what being born again is all about.

The heart of Christianity is relationship and renewal, starting with God who reached out to us through Jesus and drew us back to Himself. The world's religions tend to emphasize either a high and lofty God who must be worshipped, obeyed and appeased, or vacuous notions of striving to reach divinity by ourselves. By contrast, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts calling God "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:13-17). (In the Middle East where I lived, it is common to hear children calling "Abba", or "Dad" to their fathers. Our relationship with God is real and continuous. Jesus talked about this in terms of "My father and your Father". John 20:17)

Christianity is about being given power by God to accept responsibility for our actions: to say "no" to lying, cheating, immorality, anger, harsh words, hate, grudges, blaming others, impatience, road rage and generally bad attitudes. It is about choosing to be in right relationship with Him; setting the right (durable) goals; not taking short-cuts; seeking God's Kingdom (His will and plan in our lives) first, making decisions we know to be right, no matter what the cost and using our freedom to submit and serve Him.

If all this is true, why don't we hear more about it? Well might you ask!

How should we respond?

How can we respond to the deep needs of society around us in a “Christian” way? Like a coin, the answer has two sides: by having a relationship with God that is genuine; and by letting it show.

First, we need to do an inventory and make sure our own faith and relationship with God are up-to-date. We can’t give what we don’t have. Like Mother Hubbard, if we open the cupboard to find it empty everyone will go away hungry.

How is your Christian experience? Is it active or in sleep mode? Is God real or an idea? Is prayer a chore or a choice? Does it work? When was the last time God spoke to you and you knew it was Him? Are you motivated and led by Him? What is your relationship with the Holy Spirit like? Is He important in your life? If you feel close to God at church on Sunday (assuming you do), does this happen during the week? Does “abiding in Christ” (John 15:1-8) mean more than the words of a song? Do you need to repent of sin in your life and get back on track? Do you get enthusiastic about your faith?

I like the concept of “enthusiasm”. The Greek word “enthousiasmos” means “in God”. Our lives are bound up with His. He gives us strength to live. He has made us part of a world-wide community of people of like faith. He has given us hope for the future. Christians who are enthusiastic about God have infectious faith, the kind that gets those indifferent Dads, Mums and kids out of the house on Sunday morning to enjoying interacting with other Christians.

The word “joy” has also long been associated with authentic Christian living. Well known Christian author and apologist CS Lewis (1898-1963) used the term as part of his autobiography (*Surprised by Joy*) when describing his conversion from atheism to Christianity. Every great revival has seen a rediscovery of the sense of joy in the presence of God among Christians (Psalm 16:11; Nehemiah 8:10). Many people confuse happiness with joy. Happiness indicators can go up and down with circumstances, but joy is lasting. Jesus spoke about joy when facing the cross (John 16:24).

Christians should be the most enthusiastic, joyful people around. Research into the most influential Christian movements today confirms that passionate spirituality is what separates them from either the glitzy or the morbid alternatives. Jesus fulfilled His mission with passion. The early church was passionate about God and getting the job of evangelism done. However, while enthusiasm is great, it doesn’t always last the distance. Passion alone is not enough. Paul described the anti-Christian Jewish leaders of his day as having zeal, but “not based on knowledge” (Romans 10:2). Muslim suicide bombers are zealous to the point of death, but passionate about faulty ideas. We can be passionate about the wrong things. Or we can confuse how we “feel” with how we are. Let’s get passionate about the things of God.

What about when we don’t feel enthusiastic or joyful? I have written elsewhere about what could be called the Christian’s “spiritual fainting fits”. There are days when we “feel” less spiritual, less inclined to be bubbly. Not everyone has a constantly strong and revolutionary personality. Those who study temperament remind us that “it takes all kinds”. The fact is, God can use whatever temperament we have.

The reality of our Christian witness is not measured by an “Effervescence Meter”, but flows from whom we are in Christ, recipients of every kind of blessing in Him (Ephesians 1:3), irrespective of mercurial moods and personality traits. Guess what, people generally understand that. “Abundant life” is a fruit of “abiding in Him”, not just having an unending succession of good days.

The second response is to be “real” with others. In the West (in particular) faith is deemed to be an intensely private matter. So, too, are personal problems. When facing difficult situations, the temptation is often to create a façade, to tell a different story, rather than admit our limits. Let me illustrate.

Chua is a friend in Singapore who loves to travel. He can talk about different countries with authority and in considerable detail. He has photographs of most of the popular holiday destinations in Europe, North America and Asia. You name it, Chua has seen it all. He has friends over and he talks to them about what he has seen in the world. But before you feel slightly envious of the opportunities that have taken him so far from home, I’ll let you into a secret. Chua confided to me that he downloads all his photos from the Internet. That’s right. He has been the USA once, because he has family there, but the rest of his photographs were taken by other people and adopted as his own. It would now be a tremendous loss of face for Chua to tell his neighbours that he has given them the wrong impression. Scratch the surface just a little and the façade comes away. That’s a common human condition.

Being real means living as though we actually believe the Gospel and that our relationship with God is authentic, even when people look closely. Much of what non-Christians perceive to be associated with Christianity is not genuine. Sure, faith is subjective, but when otherwise rational people live on the basis that God is with them, inside them, skeptics take notice. People bored with “religion” need to see for themselves that God is real to us, all the time.

As I write, it is nearly Christmas time. The shop windows are cluttered with Christmas decorations. Sound systems pipe generic carols into every corner of the store, so that purveyors of luggage, kitchenware and cosmetics alike are reminded of the season. Religious themes are *au courant*. Christmas lights and decorations line both sides of the street and are hung across the lanes of traffic for several kilometres. Harried shoppers will soon emerge to battle the queues; they will loathe shopping for gifts intended to bring joy. Politicians and businessmen pose in front of gaudy snowmen in the tropics and purr quotable quotes to eager journalists. The only thing missing from this scenario is the guest of honour. He is not needed any more; the traditions have gained momentum and roll along satisfactorily. The problem with anti-reality, however, is that, when it is over, there is no trace of what all the fuss was about. It is hard for rhetoric to generate a meaningful shadow. Next month the music will change and the CDs and synthetic trees will go back into the basement; the religious themes will be considered inappropriate in this pluralistic society. So, how much of it was real? Sound familiar?

People are drawn to what works

When Andrew, a fisherman and one of the initial disciples, met Jesus, the first thing he did was go and find his brother. He then brought him to Jesus (John 1:40-42). This teacher was different from all the others.

The woman at the well in Sychar was so challenged by an encounter with Jesus, that changed her life, the first thing she did was return to her village and urge her neighbours to come and meet him (John 4:28-30). Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was so eager to see Jesus that he climbed a tree on the main road and waited for him to walk by (Luke 19:1-10). Crowds followed Jesus because he gave them hope and meaning; they had never seen anyone like Him (Luke 4:42). John tells the story of certain Greeks who were in Jerusalem during Jesus' last visit to that city. They came to the disciples and said, "We want to see Jesus" (John 12:20-22). When the first Christians started to preach that he had risen from the dead, the Jewish religious leaders discovered that they had "been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

There is something infectious about each of these encounters. The followers of Jesus had the greatest impact when they came straight from His presence, on fire, inspired, alive. Onlookers were not drawn to form, tradition or programs, but to the reality of Jesus. There was something real, something fresh about a personal relationship with the Son of God that transformed lives. There were always some who doubted (cf John 1:46; Matthew 28:17), but this did not stop them. Stephen told the court of the Sanhedrin that he saw Jesus in heaven; he was killed for this statement, but others were deeply impacted for life by his faith and testimony (Acts 7:54-60).

The personal presence of Jesus in each of these lives gave their message credibility and magnetism. What those around them saw was not a matter of mere activity but life; it had a heartbeat. That is why some of the best evangelists are new Christians; they are not bound up by process or obligations, but share the Gospel because the joy and life they have in Him is fresh and they seem to know what they are talking about. People watch them and want the same things because what they have "works". Let's get back to basics and get on fire for God. Friends of John Wesley used to say that he told them to, "Get on fire for God and people will come and watch you burn".

You are I have been given God's life. What a privilege. When we know Him, we are complete (Colossians 2:10). We can touch others with His love. People all around us have been made to know God and are hungry for what is missing in their lives. They are spiritually aware and searching. Our mandate is to show them the way "home". We don't have to impress them with our grandiloquent knowledge or hyper-spirituality; the life of Jesus in us will do that and will draw attention to Him. Then they will say, "I'll have what they are having". Not our charisma, but the sign of living faith in a living God, His power that works in us (Ephesians 3:20).

Nothing could be more relevant.