

A. LENTEN REFLECTION

When we celebrated Jesus' first coming two months ago we could have been open to the charge that Christianity was awash with sentimentality. Now in the season of Lent there's no such possibility. Today we read of the dark future that awaited Jesus

Mark 8:31-34

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Peter's seen here sorting Jesus out.

Jesus taught his disciples 'plainly.' There's no subtlety here. He's being straightforward and honest.

Mark isn't kind to Jesus' disciples. Constantly they are portrayed as those who misunderstand Jesus. Here, Peter seeks to instruct Jesus.

Jesus says 'anyone' who follows him must walk the same way that he walks. His talk is addressed to all, to any who dare to walk with him, including us.

In our day, some try to present Jesus as a means of comfort and a ticket to success – what's loosely called the prosperity gospel? For them this text is a searing rebuke. Jesus' way is always the way of the cross. Do we understand this?

Jesus' disciples signed on to his 'Follow me' without knowing what they were getting into. They've walked with him, trying to figure him out and not often succeeding

They believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and now, at this watershed point; Jesus shocks them by saying that the Son of Man will be betrayed, will suffer, and will die on the cross. No wonder Peter rebukes him!

If they'd known would they have followed him? Who among them signed on for suffering and death? Surely most of them thought they were on their way with the Messiah to glory. They didn't know what they were getting into!

And how is it with us? Sermons like, 'Do you have personal problems? Come to Jesus and get those problems fixed.' 'Do you have issues in your life that are insurmountable? Then Jesus can solve those issues for you'

How many sermons do you hear that say, 'Want to be nailed to cross? Want to be humiliated and scorned by the world? Then come to Jesus.' If only we knew what we were getting into?

PRAYER**SONG: ANCHOR**

HABIT I: BLESS

If we're going to be change agents in the world it will be because we get hold of the habits Julian introduced last week.

1. Biblical Texts

Col 4:2-6

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

1 Pet 3:15b

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

2. Difference between an evangelist and our task

Minister type	Priorities	Verbal witness type
Gifted Evangelists (a few)	Looking for opportunities; clarity in the Gospel message	Bold proclamation
Evangelistic Believers (all the rest)	Prayer for others, watchful for opportunities, wise socialising	Gracious answers

3. What kind of life will provoke questions

- * Kind... gracious... counter-cultural... people create curiosity in others
- * Unpredictable, surprising or shocking communication has greatest impact
- * Has anyone ever asked you questions about your life - leading to faith discussions?

B. Habit 1: I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church (or not a follower of Jesus as far as I know.)

The words bless, blessing and blessed appear 389 times in the NIV read – what does it mean? In Old English, it comes from the term meaning, 'to add strength to another's arm.' Therefore, to bless another is to build them up, to encourage them so they increase in strength and usefulness.

Before we speak about 4 ways in which we are able to bless others let me say we have been blessed by many kindnesses, gifts, prayers and thoughtfulness over the last 4 weeks. We have met some amazing people at the hospital, and as part of the district nursing service. Trudy has another 4 weeks of daily injections to go.

Who are we to bless?

People in Jesus' community (Romans 12:9-21 - a selection)

10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.

13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

People outside Jesus' community

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (From Colossians 4:2-6)

People who are aggressively opposed to Jesus

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. (Luke 6:28);

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (Romans 12:14)

Here are four ways we can bless believers, our unbelieving friends and neighbours and those opposed to Jesus

1. Words of Affirmation: This is the simplest way to bless someone.

Send them a note, write them an email, text them or being really brave speak words of affirmation and encouragement. Let them know you've noticed something worthwhile about them. Mark Twain once said, **'I can live for two months on a good compliment.'** Michael Frost says **'a word of encouragement is like oxygen to the soul.'**

A word of affirmation helps us live more fully. Gary Chapman included words of affirmation as one of his five love languages.

He identifies the importance of empathy in blessing others verbally: 'Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from the others perspective. We must first learn what's important to the other. Only then can we give encouragement. We're communicating, 'I know. I care. I am with you. How can I help?' We are trying to show that we believe in them and their abilities.

2. Acts of Kindness: Bless others by doing them a favour or providing some kind of practical support – cut lawns, babysit, help a neighbour move house are rather obvious ones

Someone here told me that a new family moved in next door. She took them some muffins – and discovered they had no way to heat a drink to go with the muffins. Eventually the family arrived at her place to have a cuppa to go with the muffins – acts of kindness. I've always felt if we knew our neighbourhood and blessed new arrivals...

It's a sign of the spirit's work: **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, [kindness](#), goodness, faithfulness, (Galatians 5:22)**

Who doesn't feel blessed when someone does them a favour or provides some kind of practical support? These acts of kindness literally add strength to their arm. They lighten the recipient's load. We're to look for ways to perform an act of kindness in another's life. Many of you do this.

A promise found on an old Alcoholics Anonymous card which a recovering alcoholic is required to make, **'I will do somebody a good turn and will not get found out. If anybody knows of it, it won't count.'** That's good isn't it?

Exercise your soul and bless another person by doing them a good turn this week. It will not only bless your soul, it will also provide practical assistance to another and hopefully, over time, deepen your connection.

3. Gifts: I'm talking about totally random gift-giving. Nothing blesses someone more than an unexpected gift.

The recipient of a gift thrives on the love, thoughtfulness and effort behind the gift. A gift can show the recipient that they are known, cared for and valued - totally random gift giving. A struggling family would appreciate a food basket; the victim of some misfortune would value being cheered up. Remember, bless at least one member of our community and one person who we sense isn't a Jesus follower.

I'm sure I've told you this before. When Jeremy and Rebekah were born we were at Baptist College, (no free study fees then). Gifts came from all over the country – small and large amounts from people we knew and people we didn't – enough in 1975 to buy an automatic washing machine and clothes dryer (clothes dryers being non-optional in Auckland). Understandably the washing machine wore out after a few years, the dryer we had for 29 years before we gave it away when we sold out house in Corstorphine Road – not sure if it's still going.

I want to add a fourth!

- 4. Creative listening:** listening with our hearts, our eyes; giving someone our full attention. It's costly to listen. Most work out what we're going to say next. Years ago I remember listening to someone who spoke nearly non-stop for it seemed a long, long time. This person had learned the art of speaking as they breathed in and as they breathed out. After that time of carefully seeking to listen I was exhausted.

My dear brothers and sisters take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

Let the wise listen and add to their learning... (Proverbs 1:5)

Expressions of this habit mean blessing ricochets around the church community, as members are affirming, performing acts of kindness, give and listen. It also means we're propelled outwards to bless unbelievers in these ways. Just watch how unleashing a culture of blessing — words of affirmation, acts of kindness, gift giving and listening binds people to each other. It has the effect of strengthening the Christian community while launching its members more deeply into the lives of those outside.

The challenge is to bless three people every week – at least one of whom is not a member of our church/community; at least one whom is a member; and the third can be from either category.

Do you think you could do that? Would you pray with me that God might reveal three people we could bless either with a word of affirmation, an act of kindness, a gift or a truly listening ear?

And remember Paul's words. In our dealings with outsiders we are to be **'be wise..., full of grace..., seasoned with salt..., gentleness and respect.'** When we do this, people will be intrigued by our motivation. And that's when we get to speak about Jesus, the one who taught us to bless others.

In his book, **'Discover Your Mission Now'**, Dave Ferguson recounts reading a doctoral thesis entitled 'Blessers versus Converters.' The researcher had looked at two teams of short-term missionaries that visited Thailand with distinctly different strategies. The team referred to as the 'blessers' went with the intention of simply blessing people. They saw their mission to bless whoever came their way in whatever practical ways they could. On the other hand, the 'converters' went with the sole intention of converting people and evangelizing everyone they encountered. The researchers found that the 'blessers' had almost 50 times as many conversions than the 'converters'!

When we live unexpectedly (which clearly includes the blessing of strangers), we find ourselves being questioned. Then we have the best opportunity for sharing the hope of Christ within us.

