

Communication: Jesus invites himself to dinner

There really is doom and gloom everywhere when you watch the news. These horrific floods in Mexico, the state of emergency declared in Pakistan, gathering concern over Iran (and those who oppose them). And then you make it beyond the headlines to see that further troubles erupting in Myanmar, growing horrors concerning Climate change to be debated by the government this month, and then there is the undeniable, ongoing, and unreported deaths of thousands of young people, every day, as a result of diarrhoea and preventable disease, just due to crippling poverty. (Good news paper)

Well, you could say that the only reason that we know about all of these things is that we now have mass communications available to us – because these injustices have always blighted the earth. To some extent that is true! Communication has improved, so we are better informed, and that can only be a good thing? Now that logic doesn't quite follow, because whether the information we receive is good news or bad, the heart of good communication has little to do with the transference or dissemination of information!

1: Zaccheus

The Gospel story is the ultimate story about good communication! In fact, if you have a bible that gives helpful paragraph headings, this one should read “Good Communication”! And here is why:

Zaccheus was loaded, he was well-healed, being the inspector of taxes for Jericho. In Jesus' day, it was often thought that being wealthy was a sign of God's blessing. But not always – Zaccheus had become wealthy by collaborating with pagans. His wealth was the sweat and tears of God's people, paying taxes to the Roman authorities to fuel the machine of the empire.

This meant that to a faithful Jew, looking for the Kingdom of God – someone like Zaccheus personified all that despised with a godly hatred. How could he be a true Jew, earnestly seeking for Israel's God to be seen as King of the whole earth – and yet be collaborating with the occupying forces? Yes, Zaccheus was wealthy, but he was excluded from the community, because he did not deserve to be there.

And then Jesus pitches up, arouses the interest of Zacchaeus, and invites himself for tea, tea, tea. Seyan and I were quizzed just recently about this parable. I gave my interpretation first – a typical dry, historical consideration of events. My ramblings were then blown away by Seyan's question, that got right to the heart of the parable: “I wonder what they had to eat”! And actually, that is the real question – because something happened at that meal table that turned his life around! What was it that happened? Something at that meal table satisfied Zaccheus more deeply than his 7 story house in Kensington, his Bentley and his private jet.

What had happened? The fact is, we don't know – any more than we know what happened in the tomb of Jesus or the womb of his mother. All we can see is the result: Zaccheus had found himself. That is, he had found his identity grounded in the promises of God – he had gone into his house as a sinner, and had come out as a child of Abraham. He was now an heir to the promise that the whole world would be blessed through Abraham's offspring.

So Zaccheus demonstrates his part – by paying back what he has cheated out of others, and promising justice for the way he pursues his job. Now, if you had no money - you can make that kind of gesture more easily. And the temptation for many of us is to think that what really counts is that gesture- that promise, that action. But at the heart of this story is rather – what happened over the meal table! It was the encounter with Jesus that led to all of these things – without that the gestures are empty and the world remains lost. What on earth has this got to do with good communication?

2: Communication

Communication is always an act of the Holy Spirit. But according to some communication ethicists, there are different levels of communication: The first is technical communication – you have a message, then a sender, and a receiver. This technical level is simply the imparting of information from person A to person B. And in our world, technological changes in the last few decades have made this technical level vastly more efficient. Email, mobile phones, satellite television – you can have up-to-date news immediately. We in Britain knew more about what was happening in Iraq, than the people being invaded – at the technical level. The tools of communication improve, which leads many of us to believe that communication has improved.

But there is a second level – and that is the interactive. When two people converse about something more significant than mere information. When we have to make decisions about home and use of money and school and car. The sorts of questions that go beyond, ‘can you pass the sauce’. Questions that require more personal engagement. Interactive communication.

But the third strand of communication, is transformative – the other two types are based upon this third strand. In the modern world, we tend to think that when communication occurs, we tailor the message to fit the recipients. But in transformative communication, the message is constant, but those communicating are transformed by the message. In transformational communication, it is not merely collecting information – it is allowing that information to have its effect upon you. And allowing a message or another person to have its impact upon you is this transformation of character is always, ever, only an act of the Holy Spirit!

Now what most of us understand communication to be today, is merely the technical – and how we absorb that information, is something private, secondary, ‘just between you-and-God’ to cite one dominant pagan mantra! The modern belief tends to be that communication is something that happens externally to us, whereas how we absorb that information is a secondary, private matter, that is left to ourselves. But that way we simply give ourselves as hostages to fortune.

Between these three different areas, technical, interactive and transformative, there will always be bits of overlap. But when transformative communication is simply absorbed into technical communication – that is precisely the description of manipulation! Where our characters are unwittingly shaped without realising what is happening to us.

But if communication is transformative, then there are always more than two parties involved. As some philosophers are now saying, every attempt to communicate is a wager on transcendence – based upon a belief that there is a third party. That is, that when we communicate, the fear of God is invoked. The life-changing presence of the Holy Spirit is a

necessary element of basic communication. And there is a simple reason for that – that communication is based upon Holy Communion.

Communion

The meal that we are about to celebrate here is the basis of all communication. It is the point at which we encounter transformation – because it is here, every bit as much as at the house of a sinful collaborator with the pagans, that Jesus invites himself to eat with us. This communion is not about a set of transactions that are external to us – we need forgiveness, and here is where we receive it. It is here that we encounter the living Christ, and are remade very more clearly in his image.

In fact, if we were Anglicans, then those about to share this meal would be called communicants – because we are communicating. We are allowing ourselves to be broken and remade, as we seek to embody the narrative of cross and resurrection. Far from keeping ourselves at a safe distance from the message – that brings both its good news and its bad – we eat a meal, that is, we absorb this message – by physically digesting the symbols of the story.

And stories are a superb example of all levels of communication working at once. Because stories are not told simply to entertain us – instead, when they are told well, they break open old worlds and invite us to inhabit a new world. In breaking this bread and drinking this wine, we enter into the exodus, story, become part of the Passover narrative as God leads his people to freedom. We become the people of God, the body of Christ, broken and remade. In Christ we find our common-unity, our community – and the members of this community are communicants – they become part of the story – Just as Zaccheus became part of the story of liberation.

Conclusion

Just as Zaccheus was remade in the story – so we are remade as we encounter Jesus at the meal table.

Just like Zaccheus, we become part of the story of what God is doing in the world. This way, when we see Good News or Bad – it does not remain external to us. When we read all the gloomy items I mentioned earlier – how do we react?

We do not simply nod our head or shake our head,

Whether we switch channel, or weep the pointless tears of sentimentality,

Regardless of how ignorant or well informed, bigoted or liberal we might consider ourselves to be, it is all utterly pointless if this information remains external to us.

Communion is the place where we not only observe the world through the eyes of Christ, but where we become part of the story of God reconciling the world to himself.

Like Zaccheus, it means that godless though we might be, we find ourselves invited into a life of forgiveness, and reconciliation, and blessing.

And like Zaccheus, we become the very means by which that story is communicated to the world.

Lewis and spider man (evening service)