



on the topic, 'Good news for everyone? Evangelism and other

Thank you to the trustees of the Deo Gloria Trust for giving me the honour of delivering this year's lecture on evangelism.

May I add my own warm welcome to the staff and friends of London School of Theology, and to Ruwani Gunawardene, who I know has worked so hard to make this evening's event happen. I apologise for the cold in here. If you fall asleep – well don't.

On becoming Archbishop of Canterbury I hoped to support the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion and the Quinquennial Goals of the Church of England over this phase of the Church's life by giving special priority to: prayer and the renewal of the religious life in community, reconciliation, and evangelism.

I suspected at the time that the priority of evangelism would produce the most mixed response. For some, there would be high-fives and celebration, but for others perhaps a look of horror, and a response of, "Here we go again": yet another Christian leader pushing a recruitment drive!

The starting point for any treatment of evangelism must have nothing to do with any presumed evangelical tribalism, and everything to do with the heart of the Christian faith.

In Christ Jesus, the whole of humanity is offered the gift of life with God, overcoming and transforming all the mess that we call sin. All that we know of God-in-Christ, however partial, however much a tiny foretaste of what is to be revealed, has implications not just for me, but every single person on this planet.

There are two foundational principles here: the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the universal offer of salvation through Christ. The history of the Church being embedded in different cultures and languages reflects a story that makes a difference in time and place; where history is interrupted by God's free gift to every one of us.

I speak as someone who made a very clear decision to respond to God's free gift of salvation. I may be Archbishop of Canterbury but I've not always been into this world of Christian faith. On October 12th, 1975, just before midnight, I prayed a prayer that changed my whole life.

I remember saying to God, "I don't know much if anything about you, but please come into my life and take charge."

I knew I faced a fork in the road: a decision to go one way, or another, and I knew that it had huge repercussions for me. I actually thought it would completely spoil my life!

In fact it was the opposite. I wasn't doing something that was merely about my personal comfort; a kind of private, spiritual lifestyle choice.

This decision was about public truth. Words like justice, love, mercy would take on new meaning and weight because of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus Christ would be the business of public truth.

The famous Russian Orthodox scholar Vladimir Lossky has this lovely phrase: "Jesus was the first fully human being". In Jesus, I had begun to see how I ought to be, and how the world ought to be. Seeing the truth of who Christ is somehow connects us with the grain of the universe even in

the midst of continued failings and struggles.

That first tentative prayer, but clear decision in 1975, following the witness of friends at university, their prayers, their listening to me, and the patient discussions we had late at night, was a response to the transforming love of Christ; a gift offered to all of us.

Now I'm in that odd band of Christians in professional Christian ministry (or in my case, semi-professional!), I'm no less aware that the salvation offered to me in Christ is free. It's gift. I did not earn it and I never could.

As it says in Romans 6, "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's not just life in the hereafter but it's participation in God's kingdom life of justice and peace on earth here and now. I didn't deserve any of this but through all the ups and downs, and, at times, the cost, it was the best decision I ever made.

It's the best decision anyone could make, and it is exactly the same for everyone, clergy, Archbishops, criminals (sometimes they overlap), anyone.

Sounds like good news, doesn't it?

Well this is where we get to the red meat of our lecture title: is evangelism really good news for everyone; and especially those of other faiths? I'm told that I.T. professionals have this acronym for what they regard as ideal system designs: "WYSIWYG". What You See Is What You Get.

It's a good lesson for the Church: what you see is what you get. This good news is free, undeserved, a sheer gift from God available to all. The word evangelism from the Greek, literally means "good news".

When we make our evangelism a product in a marketplace or an expression of cultural superiority, then we are falling short of the message given to us. In fact we are blaspheming and denying it. Indeed, it is possible to embark upon evangelism in a way that denies and even contradicts the very one we proclaim.

If it is free and undeserved, then there should be no place for coercion, for imperialistic ambition, for bait-and-switch techniques that buy people into the Church. Those practices are decidedly Bad News!

We would do well to start with the words of 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame."

We need to be ready: ready to speak, to share. This is hope for the world! But let that witness be seasoned with gentleness and respect. And let our actions of love, compassion, respect, gentleness confirm this as good news not bad news!

It was Marshall McLuhan that came up with that truism, "the medium is the message". Our evangelism, our witness, needs to reflect the message of salvation in Christ: the generous, universal gift; otherwise we are betraying the message entrusted to us.

That our message calls us to certain standards is not lost on those of other faiths because all too often the Church has been bad news.

This is where I'd like to suggest several challenges as we think about the work of witness and evangelism in our current context of religious diversity.

The Golden Rule

The **first challenge** I wish to make is one to our **Christian Ethics**. In working out 'how then should we live?' there are a whole host of situations that we face where we have no prescriptive guide of what to do.

In Christian freedom, we are called to pray, to worship, to read the Bible, celebrate the eucharist and be accountable to each other in the Church. Out of these repeated disciplines, we seek to live as Christ would have us live in the world.

One key indicator of our ethical lives together as Christians comes from what has become known as the "golden rule". In Matthew 7:12, Jesus exhorts his followers "in everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets."

Have you ever been in a situation where someone has tried to persuade you of something without listening to anything you have said, not caring about your own experiences, and, what's more, spent most of the time belittling your views?

I'd like to suggest that one of the most effective ways for Christians to learn about ethical evangelism is for us to experience what it is like to be witnessed to by someone of another faith in ways that don't seem to respect our own integrity or freedom, so we can then recognise where Christians sometimes act in that way.

If you haven't experienced this first hand, then I would encourage you to some imaginative process of empathy that might shape the practise of our evangelism.

In 2009, the Christian-Muslim Forum agreed a text suggesting how both communities could share their faith with mutual respect and understanding. Islam is another tradition that believes it has universal application and so Muslims are committed to their equivalent of evangelism: "da'wah".

The guidelines for witness acknowledged that we could freely hold contrasting claims with universal implication, but that putting ourselves in the other's shoes would help us do this with genuine respect.

As well as rejecting coercion and inducements, one of the guidelines asserts that "We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faith of others".

Let me just pause for a second. Because how often do we hear Christian proclamation about Islam that, either through ignorance or deliberately, demeans the faith of the other? We seek to persuade people of the love of Christ by pointing out their own deficiencies rather than the beauty and wonder of the life offered in Christ.

This is a big statement but it's based on the golden rule: would I want to have a discussion about my Christian faith, what is most precious to me,

if the other person spent their time ridiculing my faith? I would want to know the other person were listening to me and taking me seriously.

If I would want that, then I should give that freedom to others.

In the Anglican Church Calendar, we remember Sadhu Sundar Singh. He was an Indian follower of Christ, living the itinerant life of a holy man at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sundar Singh had known the transforming power of Christ Jesus and wanted to tell others about Jesus.

He would tell stories that represented his understanding of this free gift. One such story that speaks to the heart of our ethics of evangelism is of a man in a dark house. This man can see only by the light of a candle.

Sundar Singh said, "Do we quench the candle, or do we open the doors and the windows to let in the light of the sun?" Let us never be guilty of demeaning the light that others have, just show them something of the light we know.

Let's tell people about Jesus and witness to what he has done for us, without feeling the need to presume to tell others of their inadequacy.

Truly listening to the other

This moves us on to the **second challenge**, and that is to **truly listen to the person of another faith** in our witness. Another aspect of the medium is the message, of What You See Is What You Get, is the incarnational nature of the Christian faith.

God, in Christ, enters into the life of the world in time and place. God has entered, irreversibly, into the hopes and dreams of his creation: the salvation story is one shot-through with dialogue.

The Word doesn't just speak, but listens! Here's where I want to share something of the "Gospel According to Pixar".

In the film, *The Incredibles*, the villain, Syndrome, has Mr Incredible, our erstwhile hero, trapped, and begins to talk him through his motivations, "Now you respect me, because I'm a threat. That's the way it works. Turns out there are lots of people, whole countries, that want respect, and will pay through the nose to get it. How do you think I got rich? I invented weapons, and now I have a weapon that only I can defeat, and when I unleash it..."

At this point, Mr Incredible tries to escape, and then Syndrome says, "You sly dog! You got me monologuing!"

It's a humorous take on a commonplace convention in adventure films where the villain shows off while the hero tries to keep him talking until he works out a way to get out of the fix he is in.

Let's be honest. How much of our evangelism is monologuing? Speaking irrelevantly to those who may as well not be there, and if they did get a word-in-edge ways, it would make no difference whatsoever to what we were saying anyway.

Becky Pippert puts it well when she says that "Evangelism is not memorising techniques to use on unsuspecting victims."

Evangelism and dialogue are not opposites.

Any credible witness requires us to be in dialogue with the other; to hear the hopes, fears, and experiences of the person of another faith. To empathise with them. To have compassion. To share in their grief, to rejoice in their joy, to celebrate their successes and to mourn their failure.

Any dialogue with another faith other should involve us in witnessing to our hope in Christ, but doing so, as with the old cliché, with both ears as well as one mouth.

If we are truly listening to the person of another faith then one of the things we are likely to hear is something of the legacy of colonialism and the Western Church's complicity in that.

It's something that I know I need to be especially alive to as a white man of a certain age, who happens to be an Archbishop in the established Church of England. We've got form!

It's another aspect of that requirement of empathy; of being able to listen to the painful stories.

But the **third challenge** is the **need to be conscious of our colonial history and how it has impacted other faiths in Britain today**.

Being conscious of our history

How are British Christians heard when we talk of the claims of Christ by diaspora communities who have experienced abuse and exploitation by an empire that has seemed to hold the Christian story at the heart of its project?

Remember our starting point of the good news of the free gift of salvation to us in Christ? Remember that this free gift is given to us undeserving, meaning that no one is entitled or better.

The ideology underlying the British Empire was largely predicated on the racial superiority of the British.

The Church often, not always, by no means always, colluded with that racist view, and it was a thoroughly *un-Christian* worldview.

A number of my colleagues here at Lambeth Palace have recently come back from India. As part of that trip, they visited the site of the notorious Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar.

In 1919, hundreds of Indians were killed by the British Army while publicly and peaceably gathering to celebrate a local festival.

The machine gun magazines that were emptied on innocent men, women and children have left indelible marks on the remains of buildings in the park, the site of the massacre, and on the consciousness of Indian Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.

Whether we like it or not, this atrocity, and so many others, was perpetrated by Christians and done in the name of Christian Society. It's not good news; it's not of God; it's not Christ-like.

So, how might our witness hear the concerns by people of other faiths that we might, instead, be embarking on another imperialistic and dehumanising venture?

A week or so ago, I heard a story from a country I know well. A Christian group had gone into that country, which has suffered terribly from war over many years.

The group sought to divide the church there over views on a major issue that affects the people in the Global North but not so much in the Global South.

What do we make of doing that? Is that not neo-imperialism?

Some time ago, I heard that in a different African country I know, the local Christians in what is a largely mixed Christian-Muslim area of the country discouraged a foreign, western Christian from coming to lead what he described publicly as an “evangelistic crusade”.

The local Christians knew the sensitivities of the communal relations and how charged that word “crusade” was in the long history of Christian-Muslim relations.

Against their advice, request, pleading, the crusade went ahead and hundreds were killed in subsequent riots.

The errors and sins of the past are part and parcel of our present and we have a responsibility to be attentive to how that past colours the reception of our witness.

Let’s remember, though, that the Christian message is not British, and it is not white, it is for all.

Therefore, and I stand here very aware of the strides that my own church needs to take on this matter, we need to be church communities that embody diversity.

One of the evangelistic tasks for British people is to ensure that we point to a living vibrant faith and one that does not reflect the cultural assumptions of nominal allegiance.

In global terms, a typical Anglican Christian is an African woman just over the age of thirty living on less than \$4 per day. In Britain, our most dynamic and fastest-growing churches are black-led churches with cultural roots that go back to Nigeria and Ghana.

This gospel we proclaim is good news for everyone!

I read some recent research which suggested that nearly half of millennials (those in their 20's and 30's) believe that it is wrong to share their faith with someone of a different faith in the hope that some day they will share the same faith.

What is revealing about this research is that those millennials are happy to talk of the centrality of Jesus Christ and adhere to mainstream orthodox beliefs.

I believe that we need to take seriously the abuses of our history and engage other faiths with humility and empathy because our mandate to witness will otherwise be disowned by a younger generation much more attuned to necessary demands for respect and cultural diversity.

Part of an imperialistic approach to evangelism is a view that we come with our plenty to the benighted, suffering, living in darkness.

Being prepared to learn

My **fourth challenge**, and perhaps the one that those of us from the evangelical tradition find hardest, is that of **being prepared to learn from someone of another faith**.

When we listen seriously to people of other faiths, we will find that many receive great solace from their tradition.

We are not contradicting any of the claims we make about Jesus to the whole of creation, our commitment to him as the source of all salvation, by recognising that other traditions offer people encouragement, community, and even deep wells of spirituality.

But we may find our understanding challenged and enriched.

This is another aspect of us needing to listen. Max Warren, a celebrated Anglican missionary-scholar put it like this: "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival."

This is the essence of what we call the "*missio dei*": the mission of God. God's mission of reconciliation goes before and beyond anything that we may see.

Evangelism is not about dispensing bits of 'our' God that we hold in our pockets.

Whilst we can talk of the relationship we can have with God through our faith in Christ Jesus, on one level of speaking, every single person is already the recipient of gifts of God. If only through Creation. Paul makes this very clear in Romans.

In that great hymn of praise to Christ Jesus in the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians, we have these words, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...all things have been created through him and for him. He is himself before all things, and in him all things hold together."

St Augustine said, "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves."

For those of Christian faith, other faith, and no faith, where does every act of love and justice and kindness come, but from God-in-Christ?

I hope that what I'm going to say now is not controversial: some people outside the church are more like Jesus than some people in it!

And many of us who are Christian leaders will have bitter experience of that reality.

May I just ask you, to think of a moment, those of you who lead churches or bits of Christian work, even home groups, small groups, whatever it happens to be. Where do you get the most savage criticism? The stuff that really gets at you and wakes you at three in the morning.

All that is good, true and beautiful comes from God. This should be no surprise, nor embarrassment.

And as Christians we want to name the source of all that is good, true and beautiful as Christ Jesus and enable people to connect with that life-giving source and end of all our being, that they may be in covenant relationship with God.

But it means that the encounter with someone who is not a Christian, and indeed professes another faith altogether, is still an encounter that can lead me into meeting Christ afresh: to receiving a gift of God from that other person.

As I share the love of Christ with someone of another faith, witnessing to the transformation that he brings and that good news that is freely available to all, what in that other person may reveal to me something of Christ that I don't know yet?

Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. It is NOT a story about being nice to people not like you. It is the story of the person not like you showing you what godly neighbourliness might look like: the person outside the fold of faith who reveals something of the love of God.

Evangelism, in this spirit that I am outlining, is not a triumphant march of arrogance but a humble, generous journey of giving and receiving.

I think of my friend – I am privileged to call him a friend - Abdullah bin Bayyah, a Muslim scholar committed to non-violence and, to his cost, to Muslim societies that accept Christians worshipping in full freedom. Heroic man, he is in his eighties.

Meeting him has been an example to me: I do not hesitate to name his graciousness and spirituality as gifts from God.

Every time I meet him I come away thinking I want to shine with the love of Jesus in the way that he shines with the love of God.

This recognition does not stop me from affirming that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God-with-us and that a decision to follow him is the best decision anyone can make.

But the recognition of my Muslim friend's love and grace as a gift of God to me has started a genuine friendship.

In a recent book on interfaith relations, it talks of the need to balance persuasion with curiosity.

This book agrees that evangelism should be on the table as part of transparent and honest exchanges between people of faith.

The issue is not evangelism *per se*. We try to *persuade* or commend things to others all the time, and in lots of different ways.

The issue is whether we treat the other person seriously or not, and this is expressed in our level of *curiosity*.

You know what it's like when you meet someone who is genuinely fascinated by it. You think, why are they so interested?

If we want to persuade someone that Jesus is the answer to all their hopes and longings and yet we have no curiosity over their hopes and longings, nor how their religious tradition may even respond to those longings, then we are evidently not that interested in the other.

How might our witness persuade and be persuasive, while also being genuinely curious about the other?

This is not in the sense of finding the knock-down argument to defeat the other but in seeking out what is significant, how they tick, the uniqueness of their stories.

As Max Warren said, the worst error would be in forgetting that God was here before our arrival.

Our bible reminds us of a rollcall of characters beyond the covenant household of God who became bearers of gifts, even grace to God's people: Rahab, Ruth, Cyrus, the Syrophenician woman, Cornelius.

If evangelicals remind the whole church of our mandate to witness to salvation in Christ, maybe my liberal brothers and sisters remind me that there are those beyond the church, including those of other faiths, who may end up showing me something of the love of God.

Building relationship, not power

This leads me to my **final challenge**. Treating people seriously and recognising the image of God in the other and their eternal value to God means that we should never fall into the trap of evangelism as technique.

This is about relationship, about love, not about building a power base.

Evangelism isn't a tool of the Church, or about using God so that we can still be here in a generation or two.

I used to say that we need to remember that every generation of Christians is the last generation unless we evangelise. I don't say it anymore however because I realise how wrong it was. It was instrumental, you see.

How do we express our love for others in witness so that they understand that we care for them even if they make no decision to follow Christ?

Christians need to know that we can be smelt a mile off if our agenda is one that reaches out to others only if they are interested in becoming Christians.

In our world today, people are crying out for unconditional love: to be accepted in community. The Church should be the last place on earth that feels like you need a special passport or have to pass an entry requirement.

What You See Is What You Get should be our motto, so whoever you are, whatever language, culture, gender, age, ability, education, sexuality, job status, wealth etc, then you are welcome to share in God's good gifts.

What do you think we communicate when we cosy up to someone because we think they may come to the church social or the Alpha course, they say no and we suddenly drop the friendship?

The message we relay is that they only have value to us if they become Christians. That doesn't reflect the free gift of God to us in Christ: made available to the whole world.

Whether we are interested or not, near or far from God, God's initiative was freely made towards us.

Overlay that kind of conditional friendship-making with the cultural and religious histories of our nation and you can see the potentially toxic mix for relations with other faiths.

This is why so many religious groups rightly complain of being “targeted” by Christians.

It’s one thing to feel a calling to share your lives with a particular culture or people. It’s another thing to see their value only as would-be Christians.

Going back to those Christian-Muslim communities in Africa that I mentioned, these were churches that were witnessing daily in shared lives as friends and neighbours.

They would have to continue as friends and neighbours long after the foreign missionary finished his evangelistic crusade.

Witnessing to the claims of Christ, sharing what we know of that salvation story, comes in the midst of everyday stuff where we are called to speak, and where our deeds are meant to back up our words.

It’s for this reason that the Church of England’s programme to resource our engagement with other faiths is called “Presence and Engagement”.

These words were chosen deliberately to represent the full range of ways we might connect with people of other faiths in our communities - through neighbourly service, dialogue, witness and shared action for the common good.

Some people are fond of quoting St Francis saying “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

At risk of being controversial and irritating again, I don’t actually think that St Francis ever said this, and I sort of think if he did it was wrong, and I’m not sure we should use this quotation as a get-out clause to avoid verbal witness.

We are called to preach the gospel with our words, to testify, to witness to what God has done in Christ. Words are not the last resort.

However, our words need to explain our deeds and our deeds support our words.

In a cathedral I know well, there has been extensive project work serving refugees from a largely Muslim faith background.

It is a ministry involving advice and counselling, social contact, friendship and hosting. It’s the kind of ministry replicated up and down the country in so many churches.

It has been faithful, quiet, unassuming, and if the workers and volunteers were honest with you, they’d admit to a level of discomfort around this word “evangelism”.

Again, let’s remember the ethical challenge of not offering inducements with evangelism. Their story is not about inappropriate inducements though but shared lives of faith.

One of the joys in Britain in becoming a much more multicultural and multifaith country is that we are rubbing shoulders up against ~~each other~~ in

profound ways and have the potential to offer mutual challenge and learning.

Many other faith communities don't have the same queasiness around matters of faith that we sometimes do. Faith is not a forbidden topic of conversation to polite conversation at the dinner table along with politics and sex: the unconditional love of God is not a privatised lifestyle choice, it is public truth.

The cathedral workers and volunteers are beginning to learn to respond to the questions of refugees wanting to learn more about the Christian faith: giving an account of the hope that is within them.

Intertwined in these conversations are stories of dreams and visions, prayerful searches, because the refugees are familiar with the supernatural and the significance of prayer.

Somehow, in the providence of God, witnessing to Christ, offering good news that is genuinely good news, rebounds in a virtuous circle where we too may meet Christ afresh.

Witnessing to the gift of Christ is an intrinsic part of our calling. However, faithful witness will lead us into and spring from friendship, partnership, and wonder, as well as the joys of others discovering Christ anew alongside those of other religious traditions.

In many other places around the world, this is a path that is costly, where the ultimate price is paid.

The privilege of living in a free and mature democracy is that we can both be held accountable to what we do and what we profess, whilst enjoying the freedom to pray expectantly and to speak intentionally of what we know of the transforming love of Jesus.

The challenges I have suggested are no guarantee that we will not face rejection or even opposition. But let us face rejection and opposition for being faithful not because we were unethical, monologuing, imperialistic, arrogant or unloving.

We are called to speak, to witness, to share, but the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others will always be a mystery to us. That is why we need to witness in dialogue; in genuine humility.

I heard of one parish priest even this last week who was preaching to his congregation, boosted unexpectedly in recent years by those baptised and confirmed from other faith backgrounds.

He challenged them with those words of Jesus in John 15: "You did not choose me but I chose you."

The priest acknowledged the very different routes his congregation had taken to get there: in some cases literally by boat, and smuggled in lorries.

He acknowledged that some had met a Christian who had given them a bible back in their home country, some had had dreams and visions of Jesus, or had been beguiled by stories of Jesus even from within their own religious tradition.

Still others had had very mixed motives when they began attending the church, enjoying the community and support that the church offered but

ambivalent about the Christian faith.

At each of these stages, the priest said, God, by his Holy Spirit, was drawing them to himself, calling each of them.

Our part in that story of God's reconciliation with humanity is one that means that evangelism is not about conquest or competition, still less about survival and saving the church.

But it is about confident yet humble witnessing to good news to all. Jesus Christ is good news; let us be good news, not bad news, to those of other faiths!

25 min read

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