

## What is ‘the Gospel’?

The good news Jesus taught connected directly with his hearers’ lives and this is our challenge today

By James Alexander, Livability

Something struck me recently when I was reading the book of Matthew. I read that ‘Jesus went all over Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom’ (Matt 4:23). Ordinarily this might not seem strange, but it got me wondering about what Jesus actually said. When Jesus went from town to town and synagogue to synagogue, what did he preach?

I was taught that the good news, ‘the gospel’, was about how our sins are forgiven by the shedding of Jesus’ blood on the cross, allowing us to enter relationship with God. This has been at the core of what I heard as ‘the gospel’ from when I first started going to church. But that message - one mainly about his death - can’t have been what Jesus was preaching. It hadn’t happened yet.

Think about it for a moment. Can you imagine Jesus, who often got a pretty hard time because of what He did and said, telling people, “Were you around when John introduced me as the ‘lamb who takes away the sins of the world’?...well this is how it is going to work. I am going to be hammered to a cross and the blood that I shed in dying will atone for your sins”.

This is not what Jesus preached to his Jewish listeners.

The reason this is important is that in our concentration on the *final* part of Jesus’ physical life here on earth, we can easily overlook all that he did up until that point. But Jesus’ life - his teaching and example, surely has just as much significance to ‘the gospel’ as does his death, burial and resurrection.

### ***What does this means in practice?***

Over the past years, I have helped to lead a church plant on a south London council estate. I am passionately concerned for people’s salvation and live with a real desire to share the good news of Jesus and see people’s lives transformed. I often spend restless nights thinking about the pain and bondage that so many local people live in. Many of my neighbours seem like they continually live on the edge of disaster.

It was my desire to share the gospel with people in my neighbourhood that led me to wonder how Jesus spread the good news. And as I read Matthew, my question changed. Instead of wondering how to *talk about* the gospel, I found myself asking what is the gospel? What was the gospel Jesus preached?

### *A demonstration of power*

The good news that Jesus taught and demonstrated started to reveal the reality of who was in charge. No matter how powerful earthly kingdoms or demonic powers become, God's Kingdom supersedes them all. The central thread of the gospel seems to be the power and closeness of God's Kingdom. Jesus' preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God declared, "You don't have to wait any longer, the Kingdom of God, the kingdom based on love, equality and wholeness is here, be part of it. Don't view life as you have done in the past, but change how you think and do things. Trust me on this."

Through his life, Jesus proclaimed this gospel of the Kingdom. To those who were sick, Jesus' power revealed the weakness of illness in the face of God's love. Those whom Jesus forgave felt God's love lifting off the crippling weight of the law. And those who witnessed his attack on the regime of the Scribes and Pharisees saw first hand how God dealt with oppression. The message proclaimed by Jesus seems to be about demonstrating God's reign over every power and system.

Our problem is that we are excellent at reproducing exactly what Jesus wanted to change. Our churches become gripped in rigid structures and dogmatic beliefs about how things should be done. Too often this is at the exclusion of the gospel of the Kingdom.

My church had a week of prayer and fasting for the local community at the start of every month. The night before one of our prayer weeks, I got a phone call from a local woman. She was worried about there being no provision for local children during the school holidays and wondered if the church could help her organise something. I agreed and asked church members to come to the local park in the evening to lend a hand. It seemed to me that this was an answer to our prayers - an opportunity to build good relationships in our community. But the looks on the faces of some church members told a very different story. This was supposed to be a week of *prayer* - not *action*.

For some Christians it seems like church activities should be done by Christians, with Christians and in a particular set way (that is supposed to be 'Christian'). Unfortunately this means that often church activities are so dull and draining that only Christians have the politeness to bear them.

The opposite is also true: too often we are terrible at translating Jesus' gospel into contemporary experience. All too often we concentrate on the abstract concepts of 'repentance' and the 'remission of sins' and wonder why people are not listening. Do we declare the good news of the kingdom in the way Jesus and the early church did - in a simple way people can grasp?

We need to get back to the original message of the gospel of the kingdom, which brings transformation, firstly in understanding and then in action. Declarations of God's love and desire to forgive you of your sins when you repent is not half as powerful as showing people his love and forgiveness by our actions. We incarnate Jesus' power over sickness, debt, addiction and circumstances when we put his message into action - and this is when we need to depend on his authority and power.

Jesus was not and is not simply concerned with 'eternal' salvation and our heavenly future, but is acutely concerned with people's situation in the here and now. I guess it is like a loving parent not just simply thinking about their child's future, but also caring about their daughter or son's immediate well being.

In turn, as a child is growing up, their understanding of their parents' love is dominated by what they see their parents do for them as they grow up, rather than the chances this will bring for them in the future. The latter only enters the child's comprehension as they get older.

This is what is so powerful about the gospel; it is and should be about the transformation of people and their current predicament. Not simply to guarantee a place in God's Kingdom for the future, but to experience the full extent of it now. To really know that love is more powerful than judgement, that your life, our lives, can be transformed by the power of Jesus and the kingdom he declared.

One particular weekend there were quite a few new people at our Sunday service, many of whom were not Christians. Before, I would have thought about changing my message at the last minute to make it more about the cross and atonement of sins. However I kept to my script and preached a message about how God wants us to work with him to make our neighbourhood beautiful.

Later on that week I heard one of the new visitors had gone back to his flat upstairs from where our church meets and told his friends that there would be no more partying after 11.00pm. For his neighbours, this was indeed a miracle.

When I spoke to the guy about it he simply responded, “Things need to change, and I can do something about it.” Previous conversations with him about what went on in his flat had just resulted in him shrugging his shoulder and saying “I know, I know” but nothing happening.

Sometime later the same man asked the church if we could have a weekly Bible study in his flat to help him keep on track with his desire to change. He never came on a Sunday again but every week until he moved out of the area, we had a Bible study in his flat.

The gospel that Jesus preached unveiled His sovereignty not in some abstract way but in a way that showed people His care and concern for their situation. In my context this means that for the lady who is being messed around by the local council housing office, declarations like ‘Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ is not going to connect. But declaring how God hates injustice may speak directly into her situation, especially if it is said alongside someone helping her to sort out her housing problem.

### *It's all about connecting*

Is there a point in having a perfectly sound theological or traditional explanation for why we approach evangelism the way we do, if it doesn't connect with those God wants us to reach?

I sometimes hear people say that our job is simply to sow the seed and let God do the rest. This is often followed shortly after by, ‘You just don't know what effect this might have, even if they don't accept it now, years later they will remember it.’ For me this is a bad excuse for disconnected, ineffective evangelism. Even Jesus, in the Parable of the Sower, told of how seed sown inappropriately will not produce any fruit. Effective sharing of the gospel is as much about cultivating the ground as it is about anything else. This is done not through blindly firing off messages about the cross, but by connecting with where people are at in their own lives. The starting point of the gospel is always to find out what will be good news to the hearer.

Good theology does not lead to endless debates about unimportant issues: good theology helps us focus on being effective for God and his purposes. The outpouring of the Spirit in Acts chapter 2 caused the Apostles to directly connect with the people around them and speak into their lives. If what we are doing is truly rooted in the will of God rather than our own theological dogma, then we too should find this connection. When what we are doing as church is simply not connecting with local people, it is not the gospel, it's not good news.

To preach the gospel is to declare God's closeness, concern and sovereignty over the cares and worries that people have in a way they will understand. This is why we point to Jesus because God has revealed this through Him. Our desire in all of this is to see personal transformation that leads to community change. But we need to remember that these goals are often a long way down a rugged track. To try and start the process off by telling people that they need to stop sinning because God loves them just doesn't work. Sin is far from your mind, when you are struggling to make ends meet, to kick an addiction, or burdened with sickness. Yet Jesus' gospel is about freedom from these situations.

For years many of us have been trying to dress up the same message in new clothes, music or drama. All the things we think people will find 'cool' in an attempt to get people to listen. Maybe we should be trying to work out what the good news looks like to people in our neighbourhood and how we can follow Jesus example and make it real by what we do?

James Alexander, February 2009