**Sunday 28 April, 2023. Milford Baptist Church**

**HOW TO BE SHARERS OF THE GOSPEL**

 **Acts 17: 24-31**

I am sure you won’t be surprised to know that most funerals

I have attended in my life have been Christian funerals,

or, at least, funerals with Christian content

 – prayers, reading hymns etc.

In fact, I can only remember four non-christian funerals,

 The brother of a friend, The father of a neighbour,

 The partner of a friend,

 And I admit to not remembering the other one.

But one thing I found really interesting

is that three of those non-Christian funerals …..

weren’t quite completely non-Christian.

Two of them included in the service,

 Without any context, introduction or explanation,

 The hymn “Amazing Grace”

And one of the others included the “Lord’s Prayer”

 Same situation – no context, introduction or explanation.

 Just: “we will now say the Lord’s Prayer”

It sort of gave you the impression

that they wanted to cover their bases.

They didn’t believe – but just in case -

 We better put something religious in.

Well that sounds a bit like the Athenians.

 Lots of other options on offer, but in case we missed one

 Let’s add one to “An unknown God”

 Then we really will have

Covered all our bases.

Now we had a tour guide in Turkey on one occasion who had covered at least 4 bases: Father was a Muslim,

his mother was Greek orthodox,

his wife was a Roman Catholic,

and he wore a green eye lucky charm just to be sure .

But let me tell you, holding on to 4 possibilities

Gave him a low percentage chance of getting it right

compared to the Athenians.

Verse 16 of our reading tells us that the "city was full of idols."

The Message translates it as “a junkyard of idols”

Every public building in ancient Athens was dedicated to a god.

In fact, one ancient citizen in Athens once said,

 "It is easier to meet a god in Athens than to meet a man.

Well, the reason he said that was the population of Athens

 during this time was about 10,000,

but there were 30,000 statues of some god.

Someone has said:

“Like the world we live in today

 these people were drinking from wells

that would never slake their thirst;

 they were eating bread that would never satisfy their hunger;

the temples were filled but the people were empty.”

When Paul saw all these idols verse 16 says he was “deeply troubled”

Other versions translate it.

His spirit was ‘provoked’;

 ‘Stirred within him’

He was Greatly distressed

Deeply disturbed

Greatly angered

Greatly upset

You get the idea.

 He was concerned, upset, disturbed, angered.

I think it broke his heart and he knew he had to do something about it.

 He had to share the truth he now knew

 He was compelled to share the gospel of Jesus.

Now remember the setting. Athens was no ordinary city.

 First of all, it was an important city.

 It had everything—ancient temples, glorious artwork,

magnificent buildings, sublime sculptures,

brilliant philosophers,

outstanding orators, spectacular scenery.

It was the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire.

 It was here that Pythagoras established

 the principles of modern day mathematics.

 It was here that geometrical principles were formed

as well as the science of astronomy.

It was here that Socrates taught his student- Plato,

and Plato in turn taught his student Aristotle,

 and together they developed the basis for philosophy and logic.

Athens is known as the cradle of democracy,

and much of our modern day government is fashioned

after the type of government that Athens had.

But Athens was also an ignorant city.

One writer sums it up:

“This was a city that was intellectually brilliant,

educationally advanced, philosophically astute,

but spiritually dumb.

They knew many things,

but they didn't know the most important things.

They knew much about creation,

 but they knew nothing about the Creator.”

Now in verse 23 Paul says:

For as I walked around and looked carefully

at your objects of worship,

I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship

—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul referred to the thing, not the ‘who’ they worshiped.

Because there is only one God who is a who;

every other god is a what.

Now let’s remember that most people today worship ‘whats’

And not ‘who’

We worship the same gods they worshiped 2,000 years ago;

we've just changed the names.

Some people worship the god of fame.

 (how many people worship Taylor Swift?)

Other people worship the god of fortune.

 (Ion Musk or Jeff Bezos)

Some worship the god of fitness.

 (Pele, Maradona, or Messi)

 The “wahs” or the All blacks

A lot of people worship the god of fun—

 With alcohol, drugs and sex

 Offered as the activities of worship.

Then we have the political gods -

 Donald Trump, Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un

 Millions worship them – actually put their trust and faith in them

Paul was angry then.

Are we angry now?

Friends, there is only one God and that God can be known,

and the Athenians didn't know Him.

 And most New Zealanders don’t know him.

There is only one way to God and they didn't know that.

And most new Zealanders don’t know that.

May I say to you that we, too,

 should have open eyes and broken hearts

because we know the gospel.

And the people around us, on the whole, don’t know it.

Because Jesus, the Light of the World, is alive,

and there is a world around us living in darkness,

we ought to have a passion to share

the power of the resurrected Lord

with a world that is lost and without Christ.

I read about a saleslady in a department store

who was waiting on two customers,

when a woman rushed up to the cosmetics counter,

grabbed this lady by the arm and in a hurried anxious voice said,

"Do you still have Elizabeth Taylor's ‘Passion'?"

The quick-witted saleslady smiled a big smile, and said,

"Honey, if I did, do you think I'd be working here?"

Well, my hope is that you and I will develop our passion,

 To share the gospel.

Now – with Paul and his sermon on Mars Hill in mind

 Let’s think about “How to be sharers of the Gospel.”

First of all – and I think most important of all –

**We need to be authentic.**

That is: authentic Christians

That is: genuine Christians

That is ; true Christians

That is: credible Christians

That is: convincing Christians

If you are not going to act Christian

If you are not going to speak Christian

If you are not going to behave Christian

Then please don’t share the gospel.

The most disastrous word

* Think I could even say most damning word -

 to describe Christians is ‘hypocritical’

Somebody we know well says that when she was a child

her parents would fight all the way to church,

 continuing what they did a lot of the week

Then get out of the car and be a wonderful Christian family for an hour

And then get back in the car and resume the fight.

That person now doesn’t go near the church

 And has no respect at all for her parents

 The word: Hypocrites.

I wonder if any of you have had to somehow

dismiss the influence of Christians who didn’t ‘walk the walk’

 in order to accept faith?

I can assure you there are many who couldn’t dismiss that influence,

 And, like our close friend, reject Jesus and the church, because they don’t want to be like his followers that they have met.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** – an anti-christian philosopher – once said:

 "You will have to look more redeemed

 if I am to believe in your Redeemer."

― **Mahatma Gandhi**

I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.

Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

When people look at me,

When people look at you,

Do we make the gospel look attractive,

Or do we make it look ‘not worth thinking about’?

I often say that the thing that most puts me off Christianity

is Christians

 But the thing that most attracts me is Christians

Laura worked in the same office as her brother-in-law, John.

She says that more than anyone,

John was instrumental in leading her to Christ.

What made a difference in Laura’s life was not

eloquent, persuasive speeches.

Her transformation from sceptic to believer

had mostly to do with how John lives.

A turning point came one morning when John took one of her calls.

 It was someone Laura wanted to avoid.

 "Tell him, I’m not here," she said.

John took the call but later felt badly about having lied.

 He talked with Laura about it. He told her he had confessed to the Lord his sin of lying and that he could no longer lie for her.

Laura says that it wasn’t his "preaching" that moved her, but his integrity.

Laura watched how John treated other people,

including his wife.

She observed, and admired, his caring and his integrity.

From then on Laura began attending church

and became a Christian

Hypocrisy or authenticity?

If we are to share the gospel, We must **BE AUTHENTIC**

Secondly, we must be **AWAKE** to see, and to grasp,

 the opportunities that come to us.

Paul took the chance to debate in the synagogue,

 He spoke in the public square to anyone willing to listen,

 He spoke on Mars Hill to the Philosophers.

Any opportunity, he took it.

I have to admit that there are times when I reflect on a conversation

I have had with someone and think;

“I missed the boat there.

I could have mentioned God, or Jesus, or my faith,

 but the moment passed and I didn’t do it.”

I suspect some of you have felt that way too.

I always remember when I was a young adult

 a young nurse in our church used to pray every morning

that God would give her a chance that day in her job

to speak to someone about Jesus.

And she said – most days He gave her that opportunity.

If we are going to share our faith we need to have conversations.

And if we are going to have conversations we need to ask questions.

 In fact, an article I read this week says – and I quote:

 “were we to define Jesus method for engaging with people,

we see that he (1). Asked questions

(2) with an ear open to the Spirit.

 It was a conversational approach and a Spirit led approach.”

The same article suggests three questions we could use

 to open up conversations.

1. what did you mean by that?
2. Where did you get that idea from?
3. Have you considered…….what you would do next

 How you would handle…

 Where you would go for help

So we need to be **AWAKE** to opportunities to share our faith.

Thirdly we need to

 Be **ACCEPTING** of people where they are

 And not come from a place of judgement

Paul was standing in the place where the famous Greek philosophers

 once stood to address the crowd.

I have actually stood there where Paul stood and preached!

He began by telling the crowd how much

he had enjoyed walking through their city.

Paul complimented them,

"I see how extremely religious you are in every way."

We note that Paul didn’t condemn the Athenians

for worshipping idols. He was smarter than that.

Paul knew from experience that the best way to win people

is with honey and not vinegar.

Paul didn’t begin by using a sledgehammer of verbal accusations

He might have said,

 "Shame on you, Athenians, for having so many gods,"

 or "How can you possibly worship an ‘unknown’ God?"

or "You claim to be philosophers and don’t know who God really is!

 Where are your brains?!"

NO! Rather, he started with them.

There is an interesting story about the French philosopher, Voltaire.

 He was visiting London in the year 1727.

This was a time of strained relations

between France and England.

Walking along a street one day

he found himself facing an angry crowd of Englishmen.

"Hang the Frenchman," they began screaming.

Voltaire quickly took advantage of the situation.

Taking a couple of steps backward, he called out, "Englishmen! You want to kill me because I am a Frenchman?

Am I not punished enough already in not being an Englishman?"

Apparently the crowd not only applauded;

they saw to it that Voltaire got home safely.

Paul used that same kind of strategy with the people of Athens.

In a Peanuts comic strip,

Linus listens attentively as his little sister tells him

about her potential as an evangelist.

She says to Linus: "I would have made a good evangelist.

Do you know that kid who sits behind me at school?

 I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

 "How did you do that?" Linus asks.

"I hit him with my lunch box!" Lucy replies.

The Apostle Paul begins with a compliment, not a condemnation.

He didn’t tell them they were way out in left field.

He began his message where they were

WHEN WE START WHERE PEOPLE ARE

WE HAVE THE GREATEST CHANCE

OF WINNING THEM OVER TO CHRIST.

So if people drink, if they take drugs,

 If they have sex before marriage,

 If they seem to be taking advantage

of the unemployment benefit

 don’t start with judgement, start with acceptance.

A friend - who is an incredibly keen and committed Christian-

 has one grand-daughter who is a Lesbian,

 And another grand-daughter who used to be a grand-son.

Does she judge them?

 No! She accepts them,

 She loves them.

If we are going to influence people for Jesus

 Then we need to accept them where they are,

 Accept them as they are.

 Love them - love them - love them.

So we need to be authentic

 Be awake to opportunities to share

 Be accepting of people as they are,

And finally, **BE ABOUT JESUS**.

We read in verse 18

*Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*

You know – I am pretty confident that in my life time

* I am Post second world war -

 The world has not been in a worse state.

The threat of war - I don’t think has been greater.

 The enmity between race and religion hasn’t been worse.

The refugee problem,

 The hunger problem,

 The blatantly nationalistic power struggle,

 The climate extremes;

 These are all frightening.

Put all that together, and a statement I read this week holds very true:

“If Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead

there is not one glimmer of hope for the human race.”

It is all about Jesus, and his resurrection.

Friends,

If Jesus Christ is not alive, nothing else really matters.

But if Jesus Christ is alive, nothing but that really matters.

If you agree, then sharing the gospel is incredibly important

 And it’s all about Jesus.

Now I believe all of us should be able to share the gospel.

 We can’t all preach.

 But we can all talk.

I also believe that we should be able to share the gospel

in less than one minute – in fact, in less than 30 seconds.

Can you? Here is my effort to share in less than a minute.

God created human beings,

and he gave us the freedom to choose

to be in a loving relationship with him.

As humans, we chose to go our own way,

so we destroyed the love relationship

we could have had with him.

Then it got even worse and our selfish behaviour

wrecked our relationships with each other and our planet.

 Thus, the mess we see around us today.

This is what we call ‘sin’

Because God is holy, he cannot ignore our sin.

Just as in our civil society, justice is seen as right,

so God judges us and the judgement

 is permanent separation from Him – that is death! Big problem!

But because God loves us so much

He came up with a solution.

He sent Jesus to take the punishment we deserved,

By dying on the cross.

Jesus then conquered death and rose again.

When we trust in him,

we can be forgiven,

and be restored to relationship with him, others and the planet.

*Now, here is my attempt to share the gospel in less than 30 seconds.*

God created us and gave us the freedom to make our own choices.

 But we chose to go our own way,

ruining our relationship with Him,

and causing problems with each other and the world.

This is called ‘sin’

Because God loves us, He sent Jesus to die on the cross

 to take the punishment we deserve for our sin.

But Jesus defeated death, and when we believe in Him,

 we can be forgiven,

and be back in relationship with God.

I want to finish with three “IF - THEN ‘s”

**IF** Jesus of Nazareth,

 Born in Bethlehem,

 Crucified in Jerusalem;

 Really is God,

 And we believe He is!

**THEN** Christian Faith is the truth,

 For we alone make that claim.

 Done, like Paul did, with respect and acceptance,

 That is not arrogance - it is truth.

IF Jesus of Nazareth,

 Born in Bethlehem,

 Crucified in Jerusalem;

Really did rise from the dead, conquer death, and leave the grave;

 And we believe He did!

THEN Christian faith alone is not

theory, ideas, philosophy, ethics or theology.

 It is a vital relationship

with a living, personal and powerful God.

**IF** Jesus of Nazareth,

 Born in Bethlehem,

 Crucified in Jerusalem

Really is returning to earth to consummate the Kingdom

 and establish the new heaven and the new earth,

And we believe he will!

**Then** Christian faith alone is

 The faith of hope, anticipation, excitement,

life, love and eternity.

And friends,

 That is a faith worth sharing!