

To Connect we have to Compromise

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Phil 2⁴⁻¹¹ / Matt 25³¹⁻⁴⁰

I pride myself on being able to handle difference reasonably well. You know what I mean? You come across people who are different, who do things differently, who see things differently, who see and do life differently and I guess I've always felt that, for the most part I can 'go with the flow.' When in Rome... do as the Romans do! But every now and then I discover that even I have some limits. When I was in India for the first time I discovered that amongst men holding hands in public, at least in the area I was in, was no big deal and so, amongst friends you would quite often see this. Now for Kiwi men there is, as I discovered, a fairly solid barrier, a cultural barrier around holding hands and it's particularly strong in public. This is about as affectionate as we get and it only happens once every 15 years or so! So, I might be able to hold hands with a man in private – if he really wanted to... for a moment... just to be helpful! But to do so in public for a prolonged length of time was for me a challenge and I discovered this in India where one day, out of the blue one of my Indian colleagues decided that I was now his very good friend and that holding my hand in the main street was OK. Now I need to let you know that no

conversation about this, no discussion, no negotiation had been entered into with me. He just grabbed my hand and proceeded to walk down the street – with me.

And, you know, the world didn't collapse during those long long minutes that I was walking down the street hand in hand with my friend – at least it didn't outside! But inside my world was just really getting messed up. And especially when he would greet some stranger and walk across to him and engage him in conversation and... not let go of my hand. Or when he would purchase something from a roadside stall and talk with the proprietor and... not let go of my hand or call out loudly to some children on the other side of the street and... not let go of my hand. Suffice to say that by the end of that 10 minute period just about all of my sensitivities around male contact had died a very unnatural death! And yet for him, this was natural, uncomplicated, normal and very masculine behaviour which showed, I am sure, a remarkable degree of understanding and even sympathy towards this very foreign visitor to Indian shores.

The truth is I died many different deaths in that 10 minutes or so and I think my European colleagues had great fun at my expense. But I learned something really valuable too. I learned that connecting with others comes at a price and that price begins with our pride. **To connect we will usually have to compromise** – and the further away a person is from our culture the greater the compromise.

Now please, let me state up front that this isn't about giving away our basic beliefs or our integrity or our commitment to good morals or anything like that but, there are many things that we do have allow to go. I had to give away my very western view of holding hands with another man in public. This meant nothing more than friendship in another culture. Jesus gives away a huge amount, much more than this, to connect with us. In coming to earth we read in those verse from the Letter to the Philippian Church that he gave away all of his God like qualities becoming not just human but a lowly human and not just a lowly human but a human who would die and all this... so we could talk and walk with him; so we would know that He loves us.

So what are some things that we might have to give away to connect with others and specifically with those who do not know Jesus? What compromises will we need to make in order to connect?

Well let me make it easy for you this morning because I think Jesus gives us a great model for this in that we can see Him give away three things very clearly. Jesus gives away firstly any assumption about what the people around Him believe. He doesn't assume belief even if He is surprised at it's absence; secondly He gives away any surprise at people's unfamiliarity with God – and this in a nation which was supposed to be God's

chosen people and finally He never assumes that people around Him are rational.

Let me address each of these individually. Firstly 'belief.' Those of us who believe need to realise that this is no longer the order of the day. Rather unbelief is and since this is the case if we're going to connect we have to stop being offended at unbelief. I was reminded of this by a news item about a school in Auckland. Let me play it for you... *(Video; St Helier's School discontinues Christian Education after parents complain)*

I must admit to feeling pretty disappointed with this news item. I guess I felt rejected and I felt annoyed and I felt sad that something I believed in could be dismissed so easily. But as I thought about it I realised firstly that the guy probably has a point. It's pretty hard for his son to opt out and, by law at least, religious education in schools has always meant to operate outside of school hours. But the important thing is this. If the Church is to influence people like this parent we need to put aside those feelings of frustration and anger, we need to accept that they don't believe and we need then to find ways of communicating God's love **despite this**. We can't allow the lack of belief to get in the road of genuine communication otherwise our community is simply going to shrink in its influence and, eventually, in its size. **To connect we need to compromise.**

Secondly we need to realise how strange and unfamiliar a life of faith is to others. Jesus preaches in what should be a culture

which is very familiar with God but what He finds everywhere is ignorance of God's true nature and purpose for humankind. Jesus encounters ignorance in the people around Him and in His own disciples and it's a constant frustration. We read this in the book of Mathew... It's Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah;

**¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.'** (Matt 13)

But He doesn't let this get in the road of His attempt to communicate with them. He doesn't give up; He doesn't throw His hands in the air and leave.

All around us in our own culture the normal reaction is not to know, not to understand but we are not to be like that. However we are also not to be shocked at the hard and harsh attitude of society. Instead of pointing the finger which we are so good at doing our lives should be a rallying point for people to imitate God's love towards those in need. Instead of telling people off we should tell the story of God's love by what we do. Leave aside the telling off. To connect we must compromise.

Finally Jesus doesn't bother arguing with the irrational attitudes of the people he meets. I speak with many of you about current approaches to political issues and to social issues and I often find we agree with what should be done and we are surprised that our political leaders and, indeed, society at large, don't share our very rational conclusions. I mean I just make so much sense at times and so do you. But then we come across people who are simply irrational about these things and it's horrific! What to do?

You know I've never had a good conversation with someone when I've started by contradicting them outright and pointing out where they're wrong. It doesn't work people I know very well and it certainly doesn't work with strangers. To communicate I have to put away my unmistakably fine logic and mostly, listen. Sometimes I let myself leak a little bit of logic I have to admit. I know we think we're right about most things but you know if Jesus found it a good thing not to be too argumentative then perhaps it behoves us to follow His example?

Now I can hear some of you saying 'But Richard, He was confrontational – He said some very confrontational things didn't He?' I think He said some very hard things – like 'If you're going to follow me you have to die to yourself, you have to pick up a Cross, you have to give away your life etc.' But I don't think

we see Jesus deliberately picking arguments. Yes occasionally He defended Himself but even that was pretty rare.

The fact of the matter is that if our main approach to communication is to define our borders and pick an argument with anyone who doesn't either recognise them or who challenges them then we've lost the chance to really connect before we've even begun. To connect we must compromise.

God calls us to 'Go Towards Others' and the first step in this process is to decide that connection is paramount. If we're going to connect, however, we have to be prepared to compromise. To let go of our reaction to unbelief, to the lack of knowledge about Christian things and to the irrationality of some.

AMEN

Follow Up Discussion for Small Groups:

1. How adaptable are you to other people or to new contexts?
(Have you ever been to a 3rd world country? How did you cope?)
2. Can you think of ways Jesus had to 'adapt' to living a human life here on earth?
3. What things do you find hardest to adapt to?
4. What are some non-negotiables for you? (It's OK to have non-negotiables!)
5. Read Luke 9vv51-56. What were some things the James and John weren't prepared to give away which Jesus was? Why did He give these away? Why were the disciples not able to?

