

## Open our Eyes Lord

A lot's been going on behind the scenes, particularly the search for someone to take over the leadership of **Student Soul** following Ivan's departure. Initial panic. But we now have two great candidates lined up, & those of us who have been involved in the search process are really, really excited about what these two people are going to bring to Student Soul this year.

There's a bunch of other stuff we've got planned & is coming up this year to get excited about as well. From Feb 26th through to March 2nd the well known speaker, author, apologist Ravi Zacharias is coming to Dn, being sponsored here by the combined churches group. He'll be speaking in number of places, culminating with a public meeting at the Stadium on Sunday the 26th, in the evening. Now I know some of us get a bit nervous when we hear about evangelist's coming to speak, and we've probably all seen examples of not so healthy evangelism that we've seen or experienced at different times, stuff that's been over the top or overbearing or whatever. But I have to say, after watching some of the You Tube clips of Ravi Zacharias speaking & interacting with people I've been impressed with his thoughtfulness, his intelligence, & his willingness to listen to others & their perspectives. So I'm excited about Ravi's visit. And as part of the preparation for his visit, the team behind it are looking for 2 or 3 people from each church who would be willing to be involved as counsellors on the night of the 26th, following up with people who have expressed an interest in finding more about what it means to follow Jesus, & helping them find a church & so on, - & of course they will be providing training for those willing to help in this way.

There's another couple of things we are planning to do this year which I'm also excited about - one of which is running the **Alpha** course. If you're not familiar with the Alpha courses, these are a series of interactive sessions that explore the the Christian faith in a relaxed, non-pressured way, using really good video clips & stories & testimonies - & food. Alpha have just bought our a brand-new updated video series, fronted by Bear Grylls, which by all reports is really good - so later on this year we'll be looking at running that, & this will be a really good, welcoming way for us to share our faith with people who are exploring, or who have already taken the first few steps but would just be helped by being able to be in a relaxed, interactive situation where they can ask questions & explore further, & know that their questions & thoughts are going to be treated seriously & with respect.

We're also looking at resources for our small groups and for individuals to be able to use this year, things that will help facilitate spiritual growth. One of those is the '**just walk across the room series**' that Bill Hybels put together some years ago. And in fact a bunch of folk from Leith did this series a few years back - but I keep hearing how good & useful it was - so it will be one of the resources we want to offer again this year. The information that comes with this series says that it's been put together to help us step out of our "Circle of Comfort" and into encounters with those around us, with people who need someone to take an interest in them: men and women with stories to tell and who can experience God's love working through us, through our smile, our encouragement, our transparency, our friendship. And actually that's not just about evangelism or outreach is it - it's about us stepping out of our comfort zones to be more of a body, & more of a community to one another was well.

Anyway, as this year unfolds we'll be talking more about resources that can help us all grow & become more & more the people that God wants us to be, & more & more the kind of community that God wants us to be. But suffice to say, we've got lots lined up & lots to be looking forward to this year. And of course we'll be welcoming **Waldir** & **Fernanda** back in mid-Feb! - small groups, working with leaders & looking at resource needs, training needs for those groups.

Right, time to start talking about today's message - although actually, I'm going to be referring back to Nancy's message from last week as my starting off point. I really like it when there's a sense of continuity & flow, the sense that we're hearing from God & developing themes, & digging into them. Actually I was still on holiday last Sunday when Nancy spoke, but I read over the script of what she said, & wow, it was good, & I really God-given I believe, so I will be referring to that as my starting

off point. If you can cast your minds back a week, Nancy used the passage in John 2, where Jesus calls the 1st disciples, and when they start asking deeper questions about him, he says to them “**come & see**”. Which interestingly, is what Mother Teresa used to say to people, whenever anyone asked her a question about the nature of her faith, she also used to say “Come & see”. Come to Calcutta & see how we live & what we do, & then make up your minds about whether God is real or not.

The rest of Nancy’s message, she summed up with a refrain of three key words, that she wanted us to be mindful of as we move into this new year. Who remembers what they were?

**See/Notice, share, invite.** Three really good words, which I’ll come back to in a minute.

Now the other thing Nancy put me onto was the lectionary - which is the church calendar many churches use to mark the seasons like Christmas & lent & Easter, & which apportions Scripture passages to each Sunday in the year. Which is why we are using Isaiah 9:1-7 today. And actually this is a great passage for the start of a year, I think. It’s very often a passage we use (or at least part of it) at Christmas time, because of course it’s about the incarnation & the coming of the Messiah Jesus. But what I love most about this passage, & why its so great for the start of the year, is that it encapsulates so much of the message of the Good News that we as followers of Jesus have - for ourselves & for the world.

Right from the start, in **verses 1 & 2** we have this announcement that the for people who were living in darkness, in distress, in the shadow of death - that a great light has dawned, one that will turn distress into rejoicing. And this light was not going to be just for the Jewish people, but for the whole world, **gentiles** too. We learn that this light will come out of Galilee, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan - which is of course tracing the geographical path that Jesus did take, as he stepped out into ministry at the beginning of the gospels.

And then in **verse 6** it goes into that incredible description of Jesus in his incarnation - with that description we so often read at Christmas time (read v 6 & 7). We also have in here in this prophetic passage, the promise that ***the rod of oppression & injustice is going to be broken;*** we even have the promise that ***every warriors boot used in battle, & every soldiers garment bloodied by battle*** is going to be done away with, thrown away, burned up, by this Prince of Peace - that is, Jesus - whose reign & rule & government - is going to expand from that time on, until the fulfilment & the complete coming of his Kingdom. we are talking about an end to injustice, and end suffering, and end to violence, & an end to war - The Kingdom of God.

Now obviously, this hasn’t fully come yet. The beach-head of God’s Kingdom, was established 2000 years ago, with the coming of Jesus, & Jesus announced that with his opening statement in Mark’s Gospel, when he said ***“the time has come, the Kingdom of God is near - repent & believe this good news” (Mark 1:14-15)***. However, when we look at the news on TV or in the paper, clearly we are still in the midst of a battle, & we still live in a world where violence & oppression are very much present & real. And even as individual believers, we still experience oppression & injustice - & for some people, in some parts of the world, oppression & injustice are their daily reality. And its in the face of these these struggles that we remember that there is a **three-fold reality to the salvation & the redemption** that Jesus has bought us. We’ve ***been redeemed*** (through all that Jesus has done); we are ***being redeemed*** (by the present & on-going work of the Holy Spirit in our lives & in the world around us); and we are ***going to be redeemed***, in the future - fully & totally and we *will* finally enter into this full salvation, & like Dr **Martin Luther King Jr**, we’ll be able to say ***“free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last”*** - either when God calls us home or when he returns. No matter how hard life gets, or how dark the world *seems* - we have this incredible hope to hold on to & look forward to, & actually even more than that, this vision of the better future we are headed towards helps to guide our actions & our choices here & now in the present.

And how much the world we live in needs to hear this message, needs to hear this good news, & needs this vision. If you were at the Christmas Eve service here, you might have heard me

mention that I had read several articles recently that talked, with some trepidation, about us living in dark times, fearful times, globally. And in the midst of this fear & this darkness, we have a message of redemption & of hope that **needs** to be shared, & not just spoken, but lived out before the eyes of the world around us.

When it comes to **sharing our faith**, or story, there are three images that I have found really helpful.

One is that definition of evangelism that says *'I'm just one beggar showing other beggars where I found food'*. I like the simplicity, & the humility that that image conjures up.

The second image is from **Philippians 2:16** where Paul says we are to *'hold out the word of Life'* - & for me that brings to mind the image of a waiter, holding out a tray - & people are free to take from it or not take from it. I like the image of offering, & serving but non-pushiness that that image conjures up.

And the third, is tactually not an image so much as a principle, from 1 **Thessalonians 2:8**, where Paul says *"we loved you so much we shared with you not just the gospel, but our lives as well"*. Because people need more than just words from us - we need to be prepared to open up our lives to people.

Now it goes without saying that the apostle Paul, in his writings, of course, spends a lot of time writing about this hope & this redemption. And a very profound point that he makes, that we from our very individualistic, Western world view often miss, is that God's plan for redemption doesn't just apply to us as individuals, but to *all of creation*. In fact as Paul tells us both in **Colossians 1 and Romans 8**, that one day, the whole Universe, the whole cosmos, will one day be redeemed, while right now it is groaning until it can be bought into that freedom & redemption.

When we bring these two ideas together, we see why working with **people** is so important, of course, but also why working with our physical **environment** is also so important. This is why the kind of stuff Bill Lee and Phil Scadden & Selwyn Yeoman & A Rocha - & others of you here involved in the physical sciences - is so important. This is the wholism of the gospel - if we're involved in evangelism or counselling or health care or social work - anything **people centred** - we are working for the redemption of peoples lives - FANTASTIC! ; and if we are involved **environmental work**, we working for the redemption of creation, ALSO FANTASTIC - & the two need to go hand in hand. In fact **every profession & job** that God calls us to can be, & should be, part of God's work **to redeem & restore & heal** the world around us.

Now back to Nancy's first key word from last week: **notice**. Jesus calls us to not just come & see, but to notice. In **Mark 8:18** he actually rebukes his disciples by saying *'how is it that you have eyes but still don't see?'*. So we need to do more than just look: we need to really see & really notice.

And how do we do that? Well when we come to scripture to read it we need to ask God to open our eyes, & to see Jesus in there. When we meet with people - & not just the people we like & find easy to get on with, but especially with the people we don't like & don't get on with - we need to ask God to open our eyes, to allow us to see & find Jesus in them. And as we are going about our work, or walking about the place, we need to ask God to open our eyes to see God's grace & beauty in the world.

Often its really easy for us to see the sin, to see the darkness, to see what's wrong - & we do need to be aware of that - but it's even more important for us to be aware of where God is present. I was talking with Lynne Taylor a wee while back & she talked about the spiritual practice of, when you see a tree or a sunset or something particularly beautiful in nature, not just giving it a casual glance, but really, consciously noticing it - by stopping, & pausing, & absorbing, & giving thanks to God for what you are seeing. Likewise, as we go through our day, we need to ask God to open our eyes to notice those places & those glimpses of where the Kingdom is coming, is breaking through. And sometimes that will be in very unexpected places & through unexpected people. There's a

really powerful prayer we can pray, which goes: "Lord open my eyes to what you are doing today, & then help me to join in".

So we ask God to help us not just see, but to really see - to notice.

The second & third key words that Nancy gave us was **share & invite**. We all have a story to tell, & we can't afford to be embarrassed about sharing our story, because the world desperately needs to hear it, & to see it lived out. But often the key that wins us the right to tell **our** story, is that we show that **we** are really willing to hear the other person's story. As I said, **everybody** has got a story to tell, and people need to tell their stories & they need to feel listened too. One of the things I try & carry into each day with me, is the realisation that I can learn something from each person I meet, if I'm willing to really listen. And this ties in with what I said before about God so often working through unexpected people - people who may not even be Christians actually.

I want to tell you a bit of a story from some interesting things I experienced in our last few years of our life in Cambodia. Susan & I were there for 16 years, & the focus of our work was health care & discipling people among urban poor communities. But for me, the longer I was there the more I came to see the role oppression & injustice & corruption was playing in keeping the poor, poor. And because of that, towards the end of my time there, I found myself getting increasingly involved in advocacy & human rights work on behalf of those who were poorest & most vulnerable. Susan used to do that very much through her medical work & advocacy work in the health realm, but in our last few years there was a bunch of us from different mission groups who formed a group called Christians for Social Justice - and we used to pray together, about justice issues for the poor; we used to study the Scriptures together, about justice issues; and we used to act together, about justice issues. And after while, we started doing some things together with some of the secular human rights groups & human rights workers that we were working in Cambodia on behalf of the poor & the vulnerable. Now these guys weren't Christians, but they were courageous, & they were compassionate, & we came to believe that God was using them, & working through them, even if they didn't recognise it. Initially, these guys were pretty suspicious of us actually, & not sure they could trust us. Some of them had had bad experiences with Christians in the past, & actually had a pretty low opinion of Christians. But we began to pray for them, & looked for ways to support them, & work with them. And like I said before, we learnt so much about courage & commitment & compassion through these friends who were not yet Christian.

I remember one quite distressing night, when a combination of military personnel, hired thugs & demolition workers - it was essentially an army of several hundred - launched a raid on a poor community that was fighting to try and hang on to their homes & land in the face of a wealthy businessman who was trying to have them evicted. Totally illegally - the case was before the courts - but rather than wait for the outcome of that this business man's company hired several hundred demolition workers, and bought off the support of the military, & were now going to forcibly evict this community & demolish their homes. These secular human rights workers we had got to know asked if we Christians would come & help, by placing ourselves as witnesses at the scene. Susan was actually a bit nervous about the whole thing, & really didn't want me to go, but it was one of those moments when I really felt God compelling me, & telling me I needed to do this. So at 2,00 am in the morning I arrive on this barricade that the military have set up, as they begin to build up & get ready for this raid that they are about to launch. And from 2.00am till 7.00 am my role is one of praying & interceding, & talking to these troops & these demolition workers, & pleading with them not to use violence with these people who are cowering in their houses. And then at 7.00 they blow a whistle & the raid - really an invasion - starts, with a barrage of tear gas, & a baton charge, & then bulldozers rolling in. I have to be honest with you - it was all pretty traumatic, but one of the memories I have a memory of one of these human rights workers, whose name was Naly - a woman about this tall stepping in front of a soldier who was about to lower his baton on top of someone, with her arms up like this. Really brave.

What's the point of my story: its this really - after we had won trust of this group of human rights workers by supporting them, by being willing join in the work that they were doing on behalf of the poor & the vulnerable, in this action & couple of other somewhat dramatic events that I'll tell you

about some other time - well, they began to trust us. And then they began to accept **our invitation**, & started coming along to the meetings **we were** having, where we would pray & look at the scriptures together - & eat of course. And they began to look forward to it, and they used to ask us to pray for them & the people they were working with. You see, because we were willing to join with them, they were willing to join with us. Because we were willing to listen to their story, they were willing to listen to our story. And suddenly, our story, our gospel story, had credibility in their eyes. I would occasionally preach at the International church in Phnom Penh, & when I did, Naly would make a point of coming along. She now had respect for our story.

So when we talk about the importance of sharing, remember that sharing is always a two way thing. We need to have the curiosity & the openness to listen to other people's stories, & we need to have the courage & the openness to share our own stories with them - our stories of how Jesus has worked in our lives, in history, & the fact that his Kingdom **is** coming, & he's going to renew & redeem all things. Because that hope is buried deep in every human heart, & we have a story that speaks to it more powerfully than any other story that's going around.<sup>5</sup>

Let me reiterate this thought once more: as we go through our day, let's ask God to open our eyes to notice those places & those glimpses of where the Kingdom is coming, is trying to break through, even if it's in unexpected places & through unexpected people. Let's learn to say to God, often "Lord open my eyes to what you are doing today, & help me to join in".

I want to finish by reissuing the challenge Nancy laid before us last week, that this year we more & more become a people that learn to not just see, but notice what God is doing; that we more & more be a people who are really open to sharing (two ways), and to inviting people to be part of our lives & this good news that we have discovered.

Let's pray