

I want to try to draw out a connection between our two Bible readings this morning.

One reading is from Mark's gospel. We find Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee. It's 15 or 20 kilometres from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. 15 to 20 kilometres from where Jesus lived as a boy, and where Jesus finds himself on this day, walking by the sea of Galilee.

Now 15 to 20 kilometres may not sound very far to us today. Some of us travel much more than 15 or 20 kilometres to go to work each day. Indeed, a few of us came more than 15 kilometres to be in church today.

But when Jesus was a boy, growing up in Nazareth, a lake, 15 kilometres distant, was a whole world away. You could only get there by walking or donkey ride, and you can be sure that the only reason one might commandeer the donkey to go to the sea of Galilee from Nazareth would be if you had some business to do. If you were transporting fish from the lake to the town, maybe you might make the trip with your donkey. But not otherwise. Donkeys were not recreational vehicles.

And Jesus' Dad, Joseph, was not a trader. He was a carpenter. I think we can be pretty certain that the world of the fishermen by the sea of Galilee was an alien world for the boy Jesus. Jesus would not have grown up knowing the world of fishing, and he would not have known the specialised language or habits of fishermen.

Yet, here he is, walking along in this alien world and he encounters Simon and Andrew who are fishing from the shore with nets. How is this carpenter-man from the alien world of Nazareth town going to communicate with these fishermen from the alien world of the Sea of Galilee?

Well, it's easy isn't it? Jesus speaks to them. Fortunately, they both speak Aramaic, so that's not a problem. But he speaks to them in *their* language. Not the language of a town carpenter, but the language of a lake fisherman. He says "I will make you fish for people." Or as the older English translations say, "I will make you fishers of men."

Now we may think there is nothing particularly clever or remarkable about what Jesus does here. It just seems eminently sensible and smart to talk to fishermen with metaphors that are drawn from their own fishing world. If you were to bump into a fisherman, say Rex Hunt, doubtless we could strike up a conversation by talking about fishing or football. It's obvious that if we tried to talk to Rex about nuclear disarmament or stem cell research, the conversation might dry up pretty quickly. It's obvious that a feature of effective communication is language that means something to the person you are talking to.

Well if it is so obvious, why am I mentioning it? I think you know the answer. Because too many of us in churches think it's more important to speak our language than the language of our audience. Too often we think we have to *do evangelism* whereas I think we called to live and act out our faith and beliefs in the world. Too often we think we cannot bear witness to our faith, unless we say something with a Christian formula. That we haven't been a good witness unless we get the words "Jesus" and "died" and "sins" into a sentence.

Yet, the Jesus we follow was not like this at all. Jesus did not invent words like "sanctification". Jesus did not talk about "substitutionary atonement". He talked about seeds that fell on stony ground. He talked about lost coins and absent sheep. He talked about going an extra mile. Jesus talked in the language of his audience. Jesus took his audience seriously.

And so did Paul.

Paul found himself in Athens, the capital of Greece. Who, other than Sandy and Barb Clarke have been to Athens? Are any of you Greek?

Well, unless you are Greek, Athens is a foreign city.

So Paul finds himself in a foreign city and he wants to share his faith. He needs to find an effective way to do that. So what does he do?

Well, I think he does four things that tell us a lot about effective witnessing. Let me tell you those four things.

First, Paul researches the context.

Second, Paul looks for common ground.

Third, Paul speaks their language.

And Fourth, Paul starts the discussion where the Athenians are.

He researches the context. He looks for common ground. He speaks their language. He starts where they are.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

First, he researches the context. What is the first thing Paul does when he arrives in Athens? He does not go straight to meet with the Areopagus and begin his big speech about the Unknown God.

What Paul does first is what you and I probably do whenever we go to a new city. We have a look around. Maybe we take the half day city tour on a tourist bus. We try to get a feel for the city as a whole. We research the context.

The first verse in our reading today says "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols." How did Paul find out that the city was full of idols? Well, I suppose he walked around and saw them. I don't suppose he read the Living Planet guidebook, or Googled "Athens", although that might be one thing we might do today.

But Paul wasn't content with just a look around. He then went and talked to people. He met with local Jews and devout people in the synagogue and in the market place. Not just for one day, but, the text says "every day."

He debated with Epicureans and Stoic philosophers. I hope he did that at the same time. Paul would have had to be referee between these two competing philosophies. The Epicureans believed in pleasure and the Stoics believed in virtue. Paul believed in self-sacrifice, among other things. What a lively conversation they must have all had!

Anyway, all this research led Paul to the Areopagus. This was a group of people, and a place. The people formed some kind of law court and the small rocky hill on which they met was also called the Areopagus. If this seems strange that the place and the people would have the same name, just think about our Aussie institutions like the Federal Court or the State Parliament. These are still used to describe both a group of people, and a place.

Indeed, St Paul's Anglican is also both a group of people, and a place.

But back to Paul. His research of the context of Athens led him to an understanding of the way Athenians thought about spiritual matters. And his research brought him to the right place to make his speech.

If I may point to something about our pedagogical approach today, you may note that, before we heard the reading about Paul today, Sandy provided us with some context. Our understanding of the story of Paul at the Areopagus is improved because Sandy was able to give us some understanding of the context. Indeed, Sandy was able to take us on a little bus tour of Athens before we heard the story of Paul.

So Paul's first task is to research the context to get an understanding of whom he is talking to.

Secondly, he looks for common ground. Lots of things are happening in the heads of these Epicureans, Stoics, Jews, not to mention those who followed Plato, or Aristotle or Socrates. These Greeks had big brains with lots of stuff going on inside them, and Paul wanted to poke a hole in their attention. How to do it?

Well, he finds common ground in the unknown God. They have this temple to the Unknown God. Probably some kind of safety net spiritual insurance. Just in case they had overlooked some god, here was their insurance. And that is where Paul begins.

The third thing Paul does is speak their language. Of course, Paul spoke actual Greek, so that helped. But also, by engaging with the Greeks in discussions about philosophy and religion, he was doing just what Jesus was doing with fishermen. He was talking their language.

And the fourth thing Paul does, is he starts where they are, and tries to take them on a journey. He makes a start on this journey. But he by no means tries to complete it in one speech.

Do you notice how many times Jesus is mentioned in this speech?

I'll save you the trouble of looking it up.

The name of Jesus is not mentioned at all. The Athenians are capable of thinking about an unknown God, but no more. Paul has worked this out. He talks about God. A single creator God. That idea alone, the idea of a single creator God, would seem pretty stunning to the Athenian intellectuals. They have to think about this before they get to the next step.

Paul, almost as a footnote, mentions "a man". "A man whom God has appointed and raised from the dead." That's his only reference to Jesus. And it is more than enough for his audience.

Some scoff. Some say they would like to hear more later. And some become believers. Including one who was a member of the Areopagus and who later became the Bishop of Athens.

Pretty good work, Paul. Not just standing on the rock and making the speech. But excellent work in researching his context, finding the common ground, speaking the right language, and beginning where people are.

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What has all this got to do with the title of today's talk which is, in case you have forgotten, titled "Our Aussie Neighbour?"

Well, I think Jesus and Paul are showing us how to witness. They are showing us how to bear witness to the faith within us.

They are saying that, if we want to witness to our Aussie neighbour, we should research the context in which our Aussie neighbours live. We should find what areas of common ground we have with our Aussie neighbours. We should learn to speak the language of our Aussie neighbours. And we should be prepared to start where our Aussie neighbours are.

Do we understand our Aussie neighbours?

Now I have to tell you that Ken is probably a bit disappointed with me at this stage, because he supplied me with a wealth of data about Australia and Australians. I was drowning in data. Don't worry, Ken, I am still going to use some of it. But really, there is so much information and ideas about who our neighbours are that it would take a day of lectures to even begin to cover the topic.

One really interesting place to get a snapshot of Boronia is the website of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. They have this clever QuickStats button. You just put in your postcode and it spits out a whole lot of stuff about how your postcode compares with the nation. I found it interesting to see how Boronia compares with Australia. But also to see how our St Paul's community is different from Boronia itself.

The QuickStats show that Boronia has slightly more females compared with males than the national average.

And that as a community, Boronia is slightly older than the national average. Slightly more people over 55 and slightly fewer under 15.

Did you know that one person in 5 in Boronia was born overseas? That's pretty similar to the national ratio.

And after Australia, what are the next 5 ranked birth countries? England, Germany, New Zealand, Netherlands, Scotland.

Now here's a statistic relevant to today's discussion. Religious Affiliation. Fully one quarter of the people in Boronia declare that have no religion. One in four have no religion. This is way higher than the national figure of one in five.

And when you think that many people who never go to church, or only come at Christmas, declare themselves to be Catholic or Anglican... Well, we live in a largely unchurched society and

among many people who worship, not an unknown god, but no god at all (or perhaps they do worship some god, but they don't call it god).

Boronia has a higher proportion of separated, divorced or widowed people than the national average. And, as a result, a higher proportion of one parent families than the national average.

This is the Aussie neighbour we need to understand. Do we know them?

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About thirty years ago I was in Oslo, the capital of Norway. I was visiting the Director of Communications for the Lutheran Church of Norway. It was part of a study tour that a rich benefactor had made possible so that I could talk to European Christians who were engaged in the work of communicating the Gospel to an increasingly unchurched Europe.

I remember this particular meeting in Oslo for two reasons. One more significant than the other. The less significant reason for remembering is that the Director of Communications for the Norwegian Lutheran Church was a man named Radar Elsebutangen. And having once learned his name, I never forgot it.

But the more significant reason for remembering this encounter was his answer to my question—the question I was asking every Christian communicator in Europe. I asked him what was the biggest challenge the church faced in Norway.

He answered, "To get Christians to knock on their neighbours door."

Thirty years later, this challenge, to know our neighbours, to talk to our neighbours, to care about our neighbours – this challenge remains the biggest challenge facing the church. And not just in Norway. In Boronia too.

How well do we know our Aussie neighbours?

One of the things Ken gave me was a how-well-do-you-know-your-neighbour quiz. I thought I would try it out on myself.

The quiz said I should pick the 5 houses closest to my house. That's easy. We live at number 9. So I picked 7 and 11 because they're next door. And the three across the road.

Then I realised I wasn't even sure what the numbers of the houses across the road were. So I got up from my desk and looked out the window.

Across the road is number 8. It's painted on the gutter. Can't say I ever noticed that before.

So now I have 6 through 11. Not including number 9 where we live.

So to the first question:

Last names of household.

Oh that's easy. The Canov's live in number 6. In number 7 it's Justin... Umm... Justin... Or, actually, is it Julian? No. I'm right, it's Justin. Can't remember his surname, but it'll come to me.

Number 8. Oh well. The guy with the dreads and his wife who is a nurse or something. Did I ever know their surname?

Number 10. Gosh. No idea. The guy with the Ford XR6.

Number 11. Sure they are... Umm. School teachers, yeah? Got a caravan. Surname? I dunno.

OK. Not doing too well with question 1. There are nine more.

Question 2. First names of each adult in household. Easier. At number 6, Vic and Sue. Is Stephanie a adult yet? No. Just seems very grown up.

At number 7? Julian. No, Justin.

At number 8? I think I've *heard* their names, but can I remember them?

At number 10? No idea. He drives an XR6 though.

At number 11? Oh sure. Matthew and ... his wife. Wait a minute, it's on our fridge door. Mark and Amanda. I went and looked.

Question 3: First names of children.

Question 4: Occupation of each adult.

Question 5: age or grade in school of each child.

Question 6: How long have they lived in their current home?

Question 7: State in which each adult grew up.

OK. You get the idea. What does it say about me that I know the names of their cars more than the names of the people?

So, like Paul we have some work to do to get to know our neighbours.

Then we need to look for common ground.

In our street the common ground would be discussions about yapping dogs, and the state of the fences, and the number of teenagers' cars parked in the street.

This is the place to start our conversations and to demonstrate, in the way we deal with the issues at hand, how much we care, how much we love, how much we hope, how our faith as Christians make a difference in the way we deal with the issues.

In these conversations, of course, we shall find it easy to use language that communicates. Maybe there won't be much opportunity to say anything *religious* and please don't TRY. But remember how Paul was able to tag a footnote onto his conversation of the unknown god, a footnote that introduced the idea of Jesus. Often, these conversations invite us to add similar footnotes.

Just last week I was talking to someone who was interested in how I came to move to my present job. I said that I had actually given notice from my last job before I had the prospect of a new job, but that within a week of taking that terminating step of giving notice, I had three good possibilities, one of which I took.

The guy I was talking to said, "You know the same thing happened to me. I don't believe in God, but it did seem like Providence."

I said, "Well, I am sure God even cares about people who don't believe he exists."

We laughed. But maybe it was a useful footnote. Only God knows.

The last idea from St Paul is to start where people are. As we discussed the programming formats for the Christian radio station, Light-FM. 89.9 on your FM dial. As we talked about how the station should sound, we knew that most people who listen to radio expect it to sound a certain way. If you want to appeal to a mainstream radio audience, you have to sound a mainstream radio station. Maybe some Christians wish Light-FM had more sermons, or more Bible quotes, or more moralising, but that would just alienate people for whom these have no present relevance in their lives. We want to start where people are, and kick in a few footnotes that open their minds and lives to a journey. A journey towards Jesus.

So, Paul and Jesus give us a methodology for answering the question, *Who is my Aussie Neighbour?* Go next door. Knock on their door. Look for common ground. Speak their language. You may be blessed to take them on a journey. A journey towards Jesus.

Amen