



## Life on Mars (Acts 17:16-34)

If you remember from last time, I said we were going to start Revelation today. Well, we're not. What needs to be said from the first four chapters of Revelation, I believe is important for the future of our fellowship – but so is this. I was inspired to have a look at another one of my evening sermons from 2003 because we are entering a period where we need to understand who we are seeking to reach in mission and how we should approach them.

We must understand that the world of 2006 is a very different one to when I was a child and even more so for many of you who are of an older generation. I came from a thriving church in Cardiff where people we made contact with people in many ways. Explaining the gospel was easy. Inviting them to church for a special speaker, although difficult, was possible although even then, strangers just dropping in was becoming rare. Those coming had almost all been to Sunday School and had heard the good news about Jesus many times probably.

But we live in an *unchurched* society in 2006. For people younger than 50 generally and many over 50s, their understanding of God is confused to say the very least. Why? Because their contact with the Christian faith has been very superficial indeed and what they do know is usually nonsense. I was asked at Christmas, in all seriousness, where Father Christmas fitted into the Christmas story. That's about the level of most young adults these days and probably just most adults. In the 2001 census 44 million of the population claimed to be "Christian" but in actual truth only 700,000 people admitted to attending church at least *once a month*. 62% were female and 38% male. Never make the claim we are a Christian country – we have one of the lowest church attendances in the world.

What do people think of us? In a BBC survey, the main attitudes for the Christian faith were that it was for wimps and women and had no relevance for today. How do we convince men and women that Christianity isn't only just a relevant faith but a VITAL one that has eternal consequences?

First let me stress that conversion is a matter of the Holy Spirit. Here are two scriptures for you:

 *John 16:7 Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8 When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement: 9 in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; 10 in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; 11 and in regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*

 *1 Cor 2:12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.*

That being said, the overwhelming evidence that comes from growing churches, is that unlike people who have had a church background and who will often accept the Christian faith readily, unchurched people take a long time to come to Christ. It is measured in years – for men it can be up to five years. And to get there they will need *at least* 30 exposures to the gospel.

Why's that? Because of ignorance. They know nothing and their world view is not God-shaped. God just isn't part of their lives and they don't see why He should be. They need convincing and to change somebody's world view often takes

time and some convincing. After all, we are all educated these days and we are encouraged to think things through – and that's exactly what people do. And such conviction comes after a period of time. Yes, instant conversions do occur where people hear the gospel and readily accept it. This may happen if people see the amazing power of God in their lives, through a healing, or a miraculous change to a difficult situation or seeing a miracle in someone else's life. But it would be fair to say that the bulk of adult people from a non-church take time to come to faith and need someone to guide them on their journey. A study of Billy Graham crusades over the years has also shown that most people who go there are brought by a friend and their decision to commit to Christ has been the culmination of a process borne out of that friendship.

If that's how people are coming to Christ in 2006, then we must build that into our strategy as a church for reaching them. And how we present the gospel depends on who we are presenting it to. Remember, the gospel doesn't change. We never water it down, but we have adapted how we present the facts according to the capability and willingness of the people listening to understand us. How we do that is given quite clearly to us in Scripture.

For Paul on Mars Hill, willingness of people to hear him wasn't an issue. That was a good start; we're often not that fortunate. The people were there because they wanted a good philosophical argument. They loved new ideas so Paul had no problem there and he communicated Christ to them in what still is an extraordinary piece of evangelism.

But it illustrates to us lessons. First, it involves us going to where people are. Secondly it involves us starting where they are and using their knowledge and thirdly not blinding them with stuff that will baffle them until they understand what it is about.

Too much of our mission involves us trying to get people to where we are, trying to impart our knowledge in the way we are comfortable with, using terms that they simply don't understand. What do unchurched people understand by salvation, sin, sacrifice, resurrection, shed blood, repentance, trusting Jesus, eternal life? They are all part of the language of Christianity. Have you ever thought of what people may think of "giving their heart to Jesus"? That's why it takes so long for people to come to Christ – because they need to come to grips with ideas and language that might as well be Dutch to them. Our mission has to be centred on those we seek to reach, not on our own language and prejudices, but starting where they are and tuning into their understanding and language.

So what should we do? Richard Meryon gave us a useful way of thinking about reaching men, but this idea has been used generally to reach unchurched people. It recognises that coming to faith can be a process.

### **Level 1 Befriend**

### **Level 2 Introduce them to Jesus in conversation**

### **Level 3 Tell them loads more**

### **Level 4 See them become committed**

What we are saying is this? Most people we know will not readily accept the gospel spoken to them. They don't understand and often don't want to know. We need to start them on a spiritual journey from where they are. And we can lead them on that journey and present Jesus to them. We start them where they are and then help them to move from one level to the other until they find faith in Christ.

We need to recognise where in the process anyone is and take them on from there rather than try to start them somewhere else. For example, we might find that our friends and neighbours would never be seen at an evangelistic service because they are either not interested or afraid to do so. They need to be started on the process where they are. How many events or evangelistic services have we had in the past where hardly anyone has come, let alone non-Christians? We are trying to minister to people at level 2 or 3 where all the people who come in contact with are advertising or personal invitations are at level 1. So it doesn't work. In fact, if they receive more than they can handle at an early stage, then they just turn off.

The number of times I've heard people trying to reach people for Christ, having been given the brush off by someone say – well it's their lookout – it's Jesus they're rejecting and shaking the dust of their feet. Or is it that they were trying to speak to them at the wrong level? In our passage this morning, there isn't one single quote from the Bible, there's no mention of the cross, or of any of Paul's favourite subjects of grace, justification, salvation or the rest of it? Why? Because it would have seemed like nonsense. What did he do? He got on their right side. He quoted their poets, their philosophy and even used their own stories to present God to them. He didn't give them a 100% gospel, but threw something out that would make some of them say "We want to hear you again on this subject." It was level 1 stuff. Some sneered at the principle of his faith, but he made it interesting enough for others to come back. Why? He started where they were, using their culture and language to make friends.

And that's where we have to start too. What sort of thing makes friends? In a sense we all know because we have friends. On a church level, our most basic mission must make friends. On a formal level that can be through organised events like Mother and Toddler, coffee mornings, informal charitable fundraising events like coffee mornings, carnival stuff, social events, parties, rambles or the sort of family events we have had recently. In fact, a myriad of things. Like Paul, we should never lose the integrity of telling people who we are, but in this post-Christian world of suspicion, we've got to tell people that we're Christians and we're OK. And as a church we need to catch the fact that we have to do that. We just assume that people will find us a people of integrity. They don't. It isn't what they see in church. They see hypocrisy, money-grabbing for the church, people doing weird things and the rest. Look with their eyes at us. You'll be horrified. Do we want to reach people for Christ? Then as individuals and as a church, we need to break down the barrier of fear and mistrust. But as we break those barriers, we'll have no problem sharing Jesus, particularly as we lean on the Holy Spirit who is the One who convicts and converts anyway.

I don't think most of you have a problem with that. What we need to do is guide people up the levels in their pilgrimage to faith. Plenty of people will make friends with us, but fewer will show an interest in spiritual things. But if we're doing things as a church, then we need to have a means by which we can tell them more about Jesus. How do we do that? By having available events where there is going to be spiritual content. It will be the gospel. What sorts of thing? Possibly a musical evening with Christian music and talk or testimony, perhaps Table Talk where people have a meal and discuss a subject, or if we are taking people on from family events to book a high profile speaker like Jim Bailey who entertains and evangelises. If we've taken people through level 1 and they know we are OK, then we have no problem with getting them to level 2. We may find ourselves having to repeat level 2 frequently (remember the 30 times!) and producing events that give people space to talk and ask the hard questions.

Then there is level 3 which are more organised and formal forms of teaching and evangelism like church services and courses like Alpha or Journeys. How many times have we tried to get success through these courses? They are most productive for people who formally or informally have been introduced to Jesus by their friends. Somewhere around level 2 or 3, people will accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord and they will then be comfortable with level 4; being a committed disciple in the context of the church fellowship. Notice how late the bit about the church fellowship gets mentioned. Our mission is to bring people to Christ, not get them to come to Church. It's only if they are believers that they will get anything out of church.

Actually, some people even get their first exposure to faith through coming to church. But there can be problems with that. How many churchgoers have you come across that don't know Jesus? It is possible to be part of a church and never have gone on that journey of faith that meets Jesus. Going to church makes you as much of a Christian as going to MacDonalds makes you a hamburger! In the end, our goal is not filling pews, but making disciples because before God that is the only meaningful form of mission.

So what can go wrong? All this seems to be obvious. The trouble is that we just haven't been doing it! We have this event here and that event there, but there is no joined up thinking. We are doing what we want and what we are comfortable with, or what has been successful in the past without actually thinking of who we are trying to minister to, where they are and what their needs are spiritually (or otherwise for that matter).

How many of our events have been good befriending events but our friendships have never developed into talking about Jesus because there weren't enough or they didn't give people an option of level 2? A lot. Do we want to see fruit? Then we need to think carefully of how we are going to take people through the journey from 1 to 4. Short cutting or coming in late doesn't work.

So what do we need to do?

Firstly we need a range of Level 1 events – formal or informal – based in homes, in neutral sites or under certain conditions at the church.

We need a range of level 2 events that link with the level 1 events – either at the church or elsewhere and make them suitable for the people we want to invite. Church services often aren't suitable for Level 2, they are level 3.

We need to have courses available at regular periods ion the year so we can take people to level 3 without having to wait to do one. This is where Family Services fit best.

We need to have our fellowship and worship ready to make it accessible to people we are trying to attract. We need to be flexible and to sacrifice our comfort zone for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

What I'm looking for from the Way Forward is a do-able strategy that uses our gifts and time most effectively. For me that's using small groups to help people in their journey. Why? Because we live in a society that rejects the institutional and formal and the informality of a small environment brings forth fruit. Paul and Athens all over again. We use our knowledge of society to introduce ourselves and Jesus to people.

But we also need to reflect to that we can't do it all. What I've been actively exploring is how we can use partnership with other churches to mutual advantage and allow us to do things that we could never do alone as a church. The men's thing is a great example of how working together as churches can actually give us quality men's work that will build up our own men and introduce their friends to Christ. I've had talks regarding youth work in the same vein this week. I think it may well solve the problem of not having sufficient people or resources to do what we want, yet satisfying the real need to minister to people who need Christ, without losing all that to a larger church.

So how might this all work? Let me give you an example. Let's take Johnny. He's a 40 year old council worker. He first gets to hear about the church because it has arranged a coffee morning in aid of the Home Hospice which his neighbour from the church invites him to. (LEVEL 1) He's interested because they helped his granny who died last year. Through the coffee morning he finds out that there's a Dads and Lad's night at the Banger Racing so he goes with the church people (LEVEL 1) and they also go with mum and the girls to a family fun night at the church (LEVEL 1). He hears that the church has Jim Bailey coming because the kids heard about it when the bus visited their estate (LEVEL2). It's Christian but the people at the church have never pushed their faith on him, neither has his church friend.

The event is a lot of fun and makes Johnny think and he asks his church friend some questions. His friend explains how he came to Christ (LEVEL 2) At the same time he's invited to the golf club to have some training from a golf pro who also shares his faith (LEVEL 2). He has lots of questions so he takes up an invitation to a thing called Table Talk (LEVEL 2). As a result he decides to go on a course called Journeys (LEVEL 3). When he goes home he talks to his wife who has also become interested because of a few things she went to through Humpty Dumpty. They decide to try a special service at the church. It's fun and the children enjoyed it (LEVEL 3). By this time Johnny is becoming convinced that he wants to follow Jesus and accepts the opportunity to be come a Christian. Pass to Level 4.

It's bit obvious really. But it's the obvious things we have missed. As a church, we need to facilitate a route, rather than put on events or activities in isolation whether we have people to come to them or not. It needs to be done with prayer and care. What we need to do has to match people's needs.

It will also only come by our being people-centred. Rather than splattering out gospel at anonymous people, we need to expect to meet and minister to people. *4 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.* People got saved. They had names. Do we want to see new Christians in this fellowship?

Swaffham has nearly 8000 people in it. They aren't faceless; they are your family, friends and neighbours! If so, then who is God calling you to pray for? Who is He calling you to reach? Then let him write their names on your heart, so that you pray for them. So that you pray for opportunities to cement a friendship, to introduce Jesus and to be saved. Do you know what? That's a prayer, when prayed seriously, invariably gets answered!

If we want to be a church that achieves its mission, then we need to have real relationships, with real people to whom we tailor ourselves personally and our activities so that we can reach them. No longer are we going to have scatter and splatter mission in this church. We are going to have mission to people whom God has placed on our hearts to reach.

The difference should be amazing. People come to things intended for them; that have had thought and care put in for them. It's actually appreciated.

We are about to have our third Way Forward Meeting on Tuesday. It's going to be a significant evening. Last time we considered what WE wanted. This time we are going to think of what will actually BUILD up the kingdom; which will involve thinking of others beyond ourselves and our comfort zones. our Church and our Mission isn't about us, it's about them.

And Paul? He was a Jew. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisee, yet he left his comfort zone and became like the ones he was called to reach: *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Do you want to see Swaffham come to Christ? Then you must become Swaffham, the church must become Swaffham, to reach Swaffham. That's what we are here for. Let's pray and become that people.

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29/1/06 Swaffham Baptist Church  
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Scripture quotes NIV*