

We have an interesting set of readings this week - firstly Abraham is being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. I'm fairly confident he would not get a Blue Card in this day and age. Next Paul tells the Romans to not succumb to their natural passions and so not let sin exercise dominion in their mortal bodies and the Gospel reading has Jesus telling his disciples to give a cup of cold water to everyone. A slight exaggeration I know, but I hope it got your attention. In the reading immediately preceding today's gospel Jesus tells his friends that to be worthy of him, they must take up their crosses and follow him. So properly prepared, the disciples are now about to go on a mission. They're going to share the gospel message by casting out unclean spirits and curing every disease and sickness. This is a tall order. How do we set about being missional for Jesus?

Well I have just the book to answer that . two weeks ago Fr Steve and I went to Toowoomba for the Western Region Clergy muster. We were introduced to this little book by Michael Frost called "Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People". The book had such an impact that I thought I would take some time to go through its principles which will help us become missional people for God. Frost talks about five principals of missional people. Actually, they are much more than principles. They are habits, habits which he encourages us to develop as followers and disciples of Jesus.

The basic premise of the book is that Christians are often made to feel guilty for not being good evangelists such as those who are called to 'take up their crosses' and be worthy, those who regularly put aside their natal instincts and become slaves to righteousness as Paul demands.

For some with the spiritual gift of evangelism it is easy. They just naturally speak of Jesus and lead people to faith. To others it can be like trying to make a fish climb a tree. In fact, those who study such things have estimated that those who have the spiritual gift of evangelism probably number less than 10% of the church. So Michael Frost has come up with this formula. **Evangelists should be bold, and the rest of us should be questionable.**

If you have the gift of being an evangelist, you should use that gift boldly to advance the message of Jesus. But if you don't have the gift of evangelism, then you should live in such a way that others want to know what it's all about. It's about surprising the world by living a life that is different enough that people want to know why. Frost suggests we go about this by being questionable people, people who live a life that surprises unbelievers and evokes curiosity and questions about our faith. People who are missional and who live their lives in such a way that others will ask 'what makes us different?'

Michael Frost asks the question, "How can we be more questionable?" What kind of life will stir up questions in others? He outlines five habits of highly missional people. These five habits form the acrostic B E L L S.

B = Bless others

E = Eat with others – acts of inclusion and hospitality

L = Listen to the Holy Spirit – know what and when God wants you to speak or act

L = Learn about the life of Jesus – focusing not so much on doctrine as on the person of Jesus.

S = Be one who is Sent – an messenger who "alerts others to the universal reign of God in Christ."

For me this was an affirmation of how I've always tried to be a person of God. I've never been very good at going out there and telling all I see and meet that "Jesus died for their sins so that they could be saved". Of course there have been many times, in particular circumstances when I've said words to that effect and quoted scripture to reassure people of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness and love, but I believe that most of us will have some difficulty standing on street corners, raising our bibles in the air proclaiming the message of Christ. However I do think that we are all called to be the face of God to all we meet. To simply 'be a person of God, doing God's work, for the people of God in God's world'.

The first letter 'B' of Frost's acronym 'Bells' stands for Bless. He suggests that we should be questionable people by being a

blessing for others. One of the definitions of blessing comes from the old English and means "to add strength to another's arm." So, to bless someone is to build them up, to fill them with encouragement, to increase their strength. We are to look for opportunities to bless others. Michael Frost suggest three ways we do this

1) by Words of Affirmation. This is probably the simplest form of blessing. Let someone know that they are important to you. That you appreciate them. That you see good in them.

2)by Acts of Kindness. Who doesn't feel blessed when someone does something kind for them?

3) by giving someone a gift. I'm talking about totally random gift-giving. Nothing blesses someone more than an unexpected gift. They don't have to be expensive, In fact, a simple inexpensive gift can be just as meaningful as one that costs a lot. It's that spirit of generosity that reflects the character of God.

In his book Frost urges us to undertake the challenge of blessing three people every week – at least one of whom is not a member of our church; at least one whom is a member of your church; and the third can be from either category. Do you think you could do that? The idea here is to build habits of blessing.

The second letter 'E' represents eat, but before we get to that, let me ask you a question. How would you complete the following sentence: 'The Son of Man came ...?'" [pause] There are three ways that the New Testament completes that sentence and while the first two are well known, the third is somewhat surprising:

i. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45);

ii. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Lk.19:10);

iii. The Son of Man came eating and drinking... (Lk.7:34).

Yep, eating and drinking. You see the first two passages tell us what Jesus came to achieve, but the third tells us the manner

in which he did it. He did it around tables. One of the ways we can surprise the world is by how we use our table.

1) The Table Can Be a Surprising Place - One of the most surprising things about Jesus was who he ate with. He began his public ministry by providing more wine at a wedding feast in Cana. Use your table to break down the walls that separate people in our society. Surprise the world by who you invite to share your table.

2) The Table Fosters Community - The table is a forum for conversation and friendliness, for rest and reconciliation. At the table we talk. We Christians can sometimes be victims of the holy huddle, can't we? We only invite other Christians to our tables because we feel more comfortable with each other. But I think Jesus calls us to foster community with unbelievers as well.

3. Thirdly the Table Mirrors the Character of God. Eating with others can be a profoundly theological practice. This is one of the images I used to decorate the Church for Trinity Sunday. It mirrors the character of the Triune God, painted in around 1410 it depicts the Father, Son and Spirit gathered together around a table.



Frost's calls on us to live "questionable lives by the way we eat. By refusing to be gluttons or drunkards we can model the character of God, foster community and surprise our guests with our table fellowship.

He encourages us to foster the habit of eating with three people each week. You won't need to add a great deal into your often already busy schedule. You already eat three times a day. That's 21 meals a week. He simply asks that you bring another person to your table for three of those. Or if you want to cut corners, you could bring three people to your table for one of them. Invite the unpopular and the outcast as well as your friends and work colleagues

Next letter in the acronym is the first L - it represents that we are to Listen.

To live "questionable lives" to surprise the world, to attract the questions of others, we need to listen for the Spirit's voice. He suggests that we find at least one chunk of time, preferably at the beginning of each week to stop and create space to commune with God. We need to set aside a designated time to try to connect to God. It is important to eliminate distractions as best as we can, and find a comfortable position so that we can concentrate on listening to what God wants to say to us. Frost encourages us to do this for at least 20 minutes each week.

Don't start by asking questions or telling the Holy Spirit what you want. He already knows - start by simply enjoying God's presence, sitting quietly and letting the Holy Spirit possess you. Then try to follow God's promptings. It may be about who you should bless or eat with.

The next L is about learning.

The expression 'to learn Christ' was a common one among the earliest Christians, but it's not a phrase we use much these days. Frost suggests we would do well to institute a regular habit of studying of the Gospels. He says there are 2 primary reasons for putting an emphasis on learning about Jesus

- 1) one is the devotional value of growing closer to Jesus, fostering intimacy with God, hearing the promptings of the Spirit and sensing his presence through the beauty of his word in your life

- 2) secondly we need to know him if we're going to share him as the reason for the hope we have. In fact, when we're living

questionable lives, both the devotional and missional purposes for studying the Gospels intersect.

Frost talks of the church's need to embrace an incarnational stance to mission. Lots of churches seem to get the idea that to be missional we must go out to others with the Good News, but the term incarnational refers to another dimension of mission. It describes not simply going out but also the difficult work of going deeper with others. We can only do this when we become avid students of the life, work and teaching of Jesus

Frost's challenge is to commit to spending at least one period of the coming week learning about Christ.

The fifth habit - the 'S' is about to beginning to identify yourself as a missionary - a sent one.

Frost says that Reconciliation between God and humankind is at the heart of Christ's work on the cross - We are to both announce reconciliation (champion it, describe, explain, advocate for), and demonstrate it (be reconciled to others, and to encourage reconciliation among others).

To be 'sent' people we must also practice justice- Justice means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights, giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care. When Christians provide support for the marginalised in our society or emergency relief to victims of natural disasters we are showing them what the reign of God looks like. Healing and wholeness are primary expressions of God reigns in our lives.

Reconciliation and Justice make missional sense but Frost goes on to say that 'beauty ' is also a missional priority. This often surprises people, but beauty as an expression of the reign of God makes a lot of sense. Where do you feel closest to God but on a mountaintop or at a beach or in the presence of a natural beauty. A beautiful cathedral, a piece of art or music can transport you towards the creator all true beauty.

We Christians are the "sent ones" and we have been sent into our world – our workplaces, our neighbourhoods – to alert others to the reign of God. It's our role as instruments in God's hands to bring wholeness, justice, beauty and reconciliation, to

God's people in God's world. It is about reshaping our identities around our fundamental calling as the sent ones of God.

Frost suggests that we need to be accountable to one another in being missional people. He says one way to do this is by keeping a journal and recording all the ways, large and small, we are mirroring God's work in the world. It will start to shape the way we think about ourselves. We will eventually come to self-identify as a missionary, a sent person. Perhaps one of the times we share table each week could be to meet with other missional people to talk about how we are reshaping our identities around our fundamental calling as the sent ones of God.

So this week will you follow the Bells acronym - will you

- **Bless** three people - at least one of whom is not a member of our church
- **Eat** with three people - at least one of whom is not a member of our church
- Spend at least one period of the week **listening** for the Spirit's voice
- spend at least on period of the week **learning** about Christ
- and as a **sent** person be accountable throughout the week for all the ways you alerted others to the universal reign of God through Christ.

In doing this those of you who have the gift of Evangelism will continue to do so boldly, and the rest of us live our lives questionably.

When we live unexpected lives like this we will find ourselves being questioned by those around us. Then we have the best opportunity for sharing the hope of Christ within us.