Good News for the 21st Century

The very beginning of the oldest gospel that we have, the Gospel of Mark, has Jesus proclaiming, in chapter 1:15: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

But what is this good news? When someone says to you, “I have good news!”, what is your immediate emotional response? In most cases it will be one of excitement as you anticipate what this good news could be. What did Jesus mean though when he talked about preaching the ‘good news’? Those simple words have led to 2,000 years of debated interpretation. To gain a proper understanding of Jesus’ proclamation we must look at the context into which it was spoken. We need to ask what the people who listened to Jesus’ message in first century Palestine understood when he said that he had good news for them.

A quick glance at Jesus’ life reveals that he intentionally spent time with the outcasts, those whom ‘respectable’ society rejected. These included ‘sinners’ such as prostitutes, tax collectors, and any others who could not find acceptance within the community. For these people, good news meant outrageous love and undeserved acceptance, despite their actions and status in the culture. Put quite simply, Jesus’ message was good news to the poor, for they were the ones invited to the great banquet. In Jesus’ new world order – to borrow a phrase from the 1990s - the last would now be first. As a result his message caused an outrage among society’s respectable people, namely the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The reason the poor were attracted to Jesus was because of grace and acceptance, whether it was perceived by common society to be deserved or not. As John 1:17 says, “the law…was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. The common people heard him gladly. It was people such as tax collectors, those despised, ‘corrupt money-grubbing thieves’, who found themselves accepted by him. It was the prostitutes who found in Jesus acceptance for who they were as women, and not for what they could offer a man. It was these ‘disreputable’ ones who found favour with the Son of God, while the ‘respectable’ ones walked away from him livid at his audacity to declare that these outcasts would enter into the kingdom ahead of them.

Denounced as a breaker of the law and disturber of the peace, Jesus befriended the poor and humble. It was the religious elites who rejected his message because they believed themselves to already have the favour of God. This is the great challenge for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus in the 21st century. It is the challenge of remaining humble as we seek to proclaim a gospel that really is Good News. Additionally, the gospel we proclaim must not just be relevant, but it must be relevant whilst remaining true to its core message. It is easy to fall into the trap of watering down the Good News of Jesus in the name of being relevant, and lose the very relevance of the message we seek to proclaim.

Maintaining a genuine obedience to Jesus’ teachings and example will inevitably involve a conversion to the poor. We need to ponder the reality that the Christian message of ‘good news’ proclaimed down through the ages has not always been that good. We in the ‘Christian west’ are a distinct minority of the overall global church. It is time that we came to grips with the fact that the way we have interpreted the meaning of Good News, needs to change. The Good News of Jesus needs to be seen through the eyes of the poor, in the context of the culture we live in, and, most importantly, in the context in which it was meant by Jesus himself 2,000 years ago.

The problem is that the way in which the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed in the 21st century is often out of date and not relevant to the culture in which we live. If the message of Jesus is going to capture the hearts and minds of the contemporary world, we need to understand how thinking has changed since the days of the Enlightenment to today. We need to understand the change from modernity to postmodernity. According to New Testament theologian N.T. Wright, the change from modernity to postmodernity has focused on 3 areas.

1. *Knowledge and truth*. Where modernism thought it could know things objectively about the world, postmodernism has reminded us that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge...There is no such thing as objective truth. Likewise, there are no such things as objective values, only preferences.
2. *The self*. Modernity vaunted the great lonely individual, the all-powerful "I," symbolised in the proud claim, "I am the master of my fate. . . the captain of my soul." But postmodernity has deconstructed 'the self', the "I." now may be just a floating signifier, a temporary and accidental meeting place of conflicting forces and impulses. Just as reality collapses inward upon the knower, the knower deconstructs itself.
3. *The story*. Modernity implied a narrative about the way the world was. It was essentially an eschatological story. World history had been steadily moving toward a certain end of blessing for all. This huge overarching story, or metanarrative, has now been conclusively shown to be an oppressive, imperialist, and self-serving construct. It has brought untold misery to millions in the industrialised West, and to billions in the rest of the world, where cheap labor and raw materials have been ruthlessly exploited. It is a story that serves the interest of Western industrial capitalism. Postmodernity has gone on to claim, primarily with this great metanarrative as the example, that all metanarratives are suspect. They are all power games.[1]

Wright goes on to say that most of us "traditionally have articulated the gospel to people who thought...that if they worked a little harder and pulled their weight a bit more strongly, everything would pan out."[2] That modernist dream, translated into theology, according to Wright, sustains an ethic "of 'pull yourself up by your moral bootstraps, save yourself by your own efforts'. And since that was what Martin Luther attacked with his doctrine of justification by faith, we have preached a message simply consisting of grace and faith...a pure spiritual message, uncorrupted by political and social reflection"[3].

Fortunately, many followers of Jesus are realising that Good News is so much more than the purely spiritual message of individual salvation and avoiding the fires of hell. Much work has been done over the last 30 to 40 years by people such as John Smith, Tim Costello, and Jim Wallis in the west, and Archbishop Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu in the global 'South' (to name just a few), to show Christians that the message of Jesus has direct social and political implications. They have done this through their own work with the marginalised and the powerless. Other people, such as N.T. Wright, have shown through their studies of Scripture, that central to Jesus' message was the vision for a new heaven and new earth, free of injustice, greed and corruption - a world where there are no more tears and no more pain.

However there is still much work to do. Ignoring any political and social implications of the

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[1] Wright, N.T., *The Resurrection and the Postmodern Dilemma*, originally published in Sewanee Theological Review 41.2, 1998
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

gospel is still a major issue in the Christian Church as a whole, and it is only part of the problem. Whilst there are still many people who hold to a modernist mindset as described above by N.T. Wright, considerably more people are growing up in a world that has long abandoned any thought of a metanarrative or objective knowledge and values. The way in which we preach the Good News has had to change in the light of postmodern thinking. Wright says again,

> "Those who have abandoned the smokestack economy for the microchip, those who have denied all objective knowledge in favor of a world of feelings and impulses, those who have abandoned the arrogant Enlightenment "I" for the deconstructed mass of signifiers, those who have torn down the great metanarrative and now play with different interchangeable stories as they come along—those who live in this world, which is increasingly our world, are not trying to pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps. Where would they pull themselves up to? Why would they bother? Who are "they," anyway?"[4]

Whilst the way in which we proclaim the Good News has had to change in light of postmodern thinking, it must forever remain biblical. For the message of the Good News, and one of the reasons that it is good news, is that it is timeless; it has relevance for all time and for all cultures. It is our task to show people their need of Good News in the culture in which we happen to find ourselves. God's Squad founder John Smith has said that our mission is not just to scratch people where they itch, but to make them itch in the first place. Christianity needs to be seen as a coming home. Leo Tolstoy said that "the human soul is Christian in its nature [and that] Christianity is always accepted by man as a remembrance of something forgotten."[5] This is what will appeal to people today, more than mere apologetics and attempting to prove the existence of God through science or some other means. The Good News speaks to the heart of humankind. We are merely its broken vessels, led by the Spirit to do his bidding. We must remember that it is not us who lead people to Christ; it is the Spirit and the Spirit alone who does this. It is our task to imitate Christ – to do for the poor, weak and marginalised the kind of things Jesus did. This will speak louder than any sermon. The more we are broken by Christ and let him into our hearts via our brokenness, the more his message will filter out to those around us. We are simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

A holistic gospel for the 21st century is one in which followers of Jesus are characterised by orthopraxy and not so much by orthodoxy. Ours must be a 'doing' theology, or more precisely, a 'being' theology. We are called to be Christ to those around us. The words of St Francis of Assisi come to life in the midst of this type of mindset: "Preach the gospel by all means possible," he said, "and if it's really necessary, you could even use words.". Talk is often cheap in the 21st century. It is our lives which must speak and show the Good News of grace and unconditional love to a world weary and suspicious of anything smacking of authority.

In an age where there is no metanarrative, seeking to provide certainty no longer speaks to people. We live in a time when attempting to proclaim that your message is true leads to accusations of intolerance. Whilst the flaws in those accusations are outside the scope of this article, the accusations themselves must not be ignored. Once again, this is where the Good News of Jesus has relevance even today, for it leaves room for mystery, and even for doubt. We are reminded of this in what evangelicals know as the Great Commission, where the

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[4]Ibid.
[5]Smith, John, *Advance Australia Where?*, ANZEA Publishers, Melbourne, 1988

remaining 11 disciples met Jesus on the mountain and worshipped him, *but some doubted* (Matthew 28:18, italics mine). Daryl Gardiner reminds us that when some of these disciples doubted, Jesus did not tell them to stop doubting first and then go and preach the good news.[6] He simply told them to go to all the nations and make disciples. It seems as though he was commissioning them despite their doubts and uncertainties.

Seen in this light, we can have a new awareness of who Jesus is. People will always respond to stories to which they can relate, stories which tap something deep inside with an echo of something long forgotten. The modernist worldview has been found wanting, with its message of human autonomy and self-actualisation. Two world wars and the decline of Western culture have seen to that. Likewise, the message of individual spiritual salvation as the primary meaning of the Good News that arose from modernist thinking has also been found wanting. When people can view their reality in light of Jesus' love and acceptance, and are shown how the resurrection of Jesus answers the cry, not just of the human heart, but that of the whole of creation, they will see that the Good News is for everyone - not just the poor, but the rich, the lonely, the isolated, and the addicted. They will see that if the resurrection happened, then even though we may not be able to explain the reason for the evil in the world, we can know that God has done and is doing something about it.

The content of Good News can perhaps best be summed up by Rich Nathan, pastor of the Vineyard Church in Columbus, Ohio:

> "When we Christians feed the hungry in the name of Jesus, or heal a sick person in the power of Christ, or work for peace in this war-torn world, or help reconcile a marriage, or extend help to immigrants, or work for the responsible care of the environment, these actions are not a distraction from our commission to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Rather, we are living out our calling as kingdom people to partner with God in bringing about the healing of the entire universe."[7]

That is Good News indeed. A gospel that deals with every kind of selfishness, greed, lust, and corruption, promises a new heaven and a new earth, and offers us humans the chance to participate in the bringing in of that kingdom, is a message that speaks powerfully to the postmodern world in the 21st century.

by Nils von Kalm

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[6]Gardiner, Daryl, *Life is Hard: Get over it!*, sermon at Forge Intensive, Melbourne, 24 July 2006.
[7]Nathan, Rich, *Is Social Justice a Distraction from the Gospel?*, http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/04/is-social-justice-a-distractio.html, accessed on 10 April 2008.