

142 Joe Public says "No thanks"

Most Christians would agree that our "witnessing", a task given to us all by the Lord Jesus, is neither easy nor effective these days! There are some successes, thanks be to God, but overall, the story out there is usually one of apathy or hostility, with the members of "Joe Public" by and large saying "No thanks".

This is odd. Our forebears in the Early Church never had anxious discussions about witnessing, and we today are possessors of the Best News there ever could be, that is more needed than ever. We should not have to be pathetically grateful if a few folk respond to our words and perhaps come along to a service or an enquirers' course! Something is clearly wrong somewhere. In this Reflection let us start by considering why so many people today "walk by on the other side" when it comes to the Christian Gospel.

For a growing number of people today, we must recognise that the Christian Faith has simply never been a part of their lives due to their upbringing. The whole "Christian scene" just does not register - they know nothing about the Church or its people and see no reason why they need to know.

Others have had some Christian input, through school assemblies or some church contact such as Sunday School all those years ago. The key point with such people is that they honestly think they KNOW what Christianity is all about, and what is more, they honestly believe they themselves are well and truly "in" - because they live such good lives, indeed so much better lives than "that lot who DO go to church"!

And then there are those who have been strongly put off God and the Church. Many men returning from terrible experiences in war can develop a quick anger over any mention of a loving God. Perhaps someone has had a bad experience with a local church, be it real or imagined, maybe from decades ago: "The Vicar was horrid to me"; "they wouldn't christen the baby"; "they caused us trouble over the wording on Grandpa's gravestone" - etc!

Others keep away because of the Church's frequently poor public image - its endless divisions over what are seen as irrelevant issues; child abuse stories, real or imagined, with official cover-ups; a wishy-washy message always being changed so as to keep up with modern thinking; or the requirement to "leave your brain outside" and believe ten impossible things before breakfast; or the Bible seen as outdated and fraudulent in view of "the findings of Science".

Perhaps most tellingly, when it comes to such apathy or hostility, is "the mood of the age". Atheism and agnosticism are fashionable. Various religions now co-exist in most cultures, and these religions are often seen as being all the same, and on balance simply a divisive nuisance. Instead the refrain is, "Live and let live, do your own thing, everyone to his own, tolerance and inclusivity, get the most out of life while you can".

Such modern-day attitudes have one huge consequence: in practice, very few people have any sense of SPIRITUAL NEED. Whatever people's beliefs may be, if they have no sense of being in trouble when faced with Almighty God their Creator, who is perfect and holy when they are neither, then of course all talk of "Good News in Jesus" is irrelevant for them.

So this time we have briefly considered a range of people and attitudes around us today, which highlight one crucial truth: that people are individuals, and we are to tailor our witnessing according to their particular beliefs and outlook - just as we see in Scripture the Lord and the apostles constantly did.

You might prayerfully think now of people you know for whom Jesus Christ means virtually nothing at present - a relative, a neighbour, a colleague. In each case, why is this? And in each case, what therefore is an effective way forward to evoke a response of "So tell me more" rather than the more common "No thanks"?

Still to come God willing, we will remind ourselves of God's role and our role in terms of witnessing, evangelising and conversion; we can address the reasons why we are scared to witness; and we will identify a vital key to unlocking that firmly-shut door of "I have no need".

So witnessing need not be a no-go area for us! Meanwhile we can simply ask the Lord at the start of the day, "Lord, please give me Gospel openings today, and the right words and tone when the time comes". But beware - He is likely to answer that prayer, and quickly!

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