

Doing the Stuff - Does God Speak Today?

ACTS 1:8
But you will receive power when my Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.



The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences is a journal for peer reviewed research papers. They recently published a paper (Carlos A. Botero, Beth Gardner, Kathryn R. Kirby, Joseph Bulbulia, Michael C. Gavin, and Russell D. Gray, 10 November 2014), The Ecology of Religious Beliefs, which sought to discern whether the world's ecology influenced religious societies. One of the interesting conclusions they reached was that humans are more likely to believe in powerful and judgemental gods during times of hardship and extremes of weather.

In my experience, it is in times of difficulty and doubt that people naturally turn toward God rather than away from him. This interesting research seems to bear this out although there are additional, behavioural and sociological hypotheses for it.

It would explain why, in our, relatively comfortable and safe, society (I know there is poverty and violence but nothing like the experience of most of the rest of the world) people find it relatively easy to dismiss the possibility of there being a God. I am sure that you know many people who are doing fine thanks and don't need a "crutch" to lean on. I sometimes fall into thinking that way myself.

You might have thought that when the going gets tough, the tough strike out on their own and go shopping – they don't turn to God. When things go wrong, especially when there seems to be no explanation or justification people do sometimes react by dismissing the idea of God saying "How could a God of love let something like this happen?" Or, "If there is a God I don't want to know him."

But here we are, in church, not only saying that there is a God but that he wants to have a relationship with you and, more than that, he is a loving God and, more than that, he is present and intervening in our lives on a day-to-day basis – and inviting us to be His witnesses – to speak on his behalf.

But testifying to Jesus and stepping out to pray for people is not something that many of us leap into doing without fear and embarrassment. There are a minority of people who have a combination of an outgoing personality and spiritual gifting for whom "walking across the room" is very natural. The rest of us need a little help in doing what we know we would love to do but which just find difficult or awkward.

Gunita King, who heads up the Treasure Hunting part of the healing on the Streets team started off full of fear, embarrassment and nerves. She explained her change of heart & approach by saying that as she worshipped and went to Jesus He grew His heart of compassion in her so that she began to see people as precious and loved by God. So now when she prays for people she does it out of compassion rather than guilt or fear, although still with some nervousness!

So we are going to be witnesses says Jesus in Acts 1:8.

I am expecting to go to court soon to be a character witness for someone. I had to sign a statement about how I knew him and what he is like. I am witnessing as someone who knows that person, who has spoken with them, done life with them.

If I were put on the witness stand and asked to give a character reference for Jesus – would I be able to do the same? Would I be able to say, “Yes, I know him, and he is this sort of person”?

For us religion isn't a meaningless series of rituals and words but an effervescent expression of a living relationship with the creator of the universe. God sends Jesus His Son so that we know what He is like and He promises to leave His Holy Spirit within us so that we can know Him every minute and meter of the day.

Our relationship with Him lifts us out of a bland, self-satisfied, self-obsessed, guilt-ridden existence into a redeemed charge towards a better world and a liberated worship of the King of kings.

We are witnesses to the person of Jesus Christ. Our redeemer, hero and model for life. Whatever your doubts and questions, at the end of the day you have to deal with Him and what He did and said. And one of the main things He did and said was that we should do and say - like Him.

We should do what Jesus did. What did he do? He healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, fed the hungry, taught how to live, crossed cultural and ethnic boundaries, served, sacrificed, changed the world.



In March we are hosting a conference here called **“Doing the Stuff”** – which is the way we describe doing what Jesus did. Over the next few weeks we are going to be looking at what that means – how to talk with people about Jesus, how to pray for the sick and cast out demons, how to feed the poor.

The main speaker is Robby Dawkins whose book, **“Do What Jesus Did”** is available from **Vineyard Records**.

In preparation for that I am going to consider the fundamental question – does God speak today? Is there a God at all and if there is, has he spoken and does He speak? Is he part of our lives in a real, day-to-day way?

I am having to be reductive here for the purposes of a 25 minute sermon – so let's simplify this to four points on a spectrum. Please forgive my use of theological language to try and say it quickly.

1. Atheism – there is no God and therefore there is no speaking from god. If you think you have any relationship with a god then it is an unscientific belief of your own creation. Not only does god not speak – he doesn't exist so anything you think you hear is artifice.
2. Deism/Theism – there is a god or gods but they don't speak. Don't intervene. Transcendent. Out there somewhere but, apart perhaps from creating the world, takes no part in our lives and has no interest. He/she/it doesn't speak and we cannot know him. There is no revelation, no way of hearing or seeing.
3. Dispensationalism – a technical term about Christianity which incorporates a cessationist viewpoint. Very simplified it believes that there is a God and that he reveals himself through the bible, through the people of Israel, through Jesus and will one day bring heaven to earth when everything will be restored – no more crying, no more pain, the lion will lie down with the lamb.
4. Vineyard (sitting within a broad evangelical and charismatic part of the church) – where we believe that there is a God, that He reveals himself, primarily through His Son Jesus and that He sends His Holy Spirit to be with us today, speaking to us and bringing the Kingdom of God to earth now. The verse from Acts 1:8 (“and you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses”) is, very active and very present. He is immanent as well as transcendent.

There will be people in the room (and listening to this on line) from across the spectrum and with other nuances. And that is fine. I am explaining what we believe in the Vineyard and why we do what we do.

Matthew 4:17

When Jesus first described his ministry he said, **“Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand”**.

It’s really important that you grasp this in order to have a context for what we are going to be teaching in the coming weeks. We believe we are living in a broken world, which is not hard to see. But we believe that this is as a result of God’s good creation being wrecked by sin and by the work of the Satan – the enemy.

When God sent Jesus to live amongst us (Christmas) and to die for us and then be resurrected from the dead (Easter) He was intervening in a war in a final and cataclysmic way. Through Jesus the enemy has been defeated, the power of death is broken and there is forgiveness for sins.

But we still live in the time between times when we experience the brokenness of the world every day – both in ourselves and between us and in the world. And yet we see the promised Kingdom of God too – when people are set free from their sin, when disease is healed, demons cast out, the hungry fed, families restored and people rescued from financial ruin.

There’s both – we call it the already and the not yet. We are on the front line of the battle – and we see the enemy make some progress and then we see the Kingdom of God advance again.

It is like the end of the second world war. The decisive battle that saw the beginning of the end was D Day on 6 June 1944. But for nearly another year there were battles all over Europe until, finally, VE Day was declared on 8 May 1945. In between, the end of the war and the victory of the Allied forces was inevitable, but battles were still being fought.

We live in the same in-between time. When Jesus lived, died and rose again the war was won. The victory has been accomplished, the end is inevitable when God will once again inaugurate his new creation. His Kingdom is advancing toward a certain end when his rule and reign will once again have dominion over everything in the universe.

And we are part of that Kingdom advance. The amazing thing is that God is using you and me to fight those last battles. Sometimes we lose and sometimes we win but we fight on knowing that God will be victorious and that one day it will all be over and we will see heaven on earth – we will once again be with our lost loved ones, we will see no dying or disease, or pain or goodbyes. Sin will have been defeated and the enemy vanquished.

When we look at what Jesus did, we need to understand it in this context. When he spoke he was speaking truth into a war zone of lies and misinformation. When he fed the hungry and healed the sick he was cutting off the enemies lines of attack, one by one. When he rose from the grave he broke, once and for all, the power of death. He has tied up the strong man and is now ransacking his house.

So when we say, “Let’s do what Jesus did”, “Let’s do the stuff”, we are being used by God to bring His kingdom rule and reign to bear.

- When you smile at someone and speak a kind word you are striking a blow for the kingdom.
- When you give your money or time to help someone in need you are a servant of the King.
- When you pray for someone who is sick or cast out a demon you are smashing the enemy’s work in someone’s life.
- When you share your faith, your relationship with Jesus, you are taking out the enemy’s supply lines.

Psalm 50:1-3a The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and will not be silent.

Yes, God speaks today, loud and clear and many times through you – through the way you look at people, through the words you say, through what you do. It's really exciting to be part of God's Kingdom here in Headingley and Leeds and to be used by Him to bring others into the kingdom.

So here we are, deeply astounded that the God of heaven
should stoop to seek us out at all,
should give of himself to rescue us,
should invite us into His kingdom mission, and
should send His Spirit to fill us and empower us.

We want to see His kingdom come, we want to see the work of the enemy shoved back and destroyed. We are so grateful for God's mercy in setting us free, for his invitation to be disciples of Jesus - doing what He did – to stand in the heritage of the multitudes over the centuries who have given their lives to Jesus and through whose willing hands and hearts he is bringing about his Kingdom.

We shall set aside our pride and self-sufficiency, gather up our doubts and questions, our insecurities and fears, and, holding them lightly, we'll go to Him for our instructions and to be filled with the Spirit, again. Shall we do the stuff together?

David Flowers
18 January 2015