

Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel

SESSION 2

Finding Ways to Communicate Jesus Wherever We Are

Introduction

Allow me to sum up our first session in one sentence from Pope Francis: ‘I invite all Christians everywhere at this very moment, to a renewed personal *encounter* with Christ, or at least an openness to letting him *encounter* them.’¹ There’s that word again, *encounter*. Furthermore, Pope Francis writes: ‘whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.’²

In this second session, we’ll consider some examples of people sharing the gospel. Pope Francis begins: ‘Thanks solely to this encounter with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship; we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.’³ Moreover, ‘God has found a way to unite himself to every human being in every age.’⁴ That’s a challenging sentence for us, used as we are to turning on the TV news each night to hear of the dark and detestable things we human beings inflict on each other. It takes imagination, the imagination we call faith, to say, along with Pope Francis: ‘God has found a way to unite himself to every human being in every age.’ Francis continues: ‘as part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of humanity with an instinct of faith.’⁵ This is far from sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, John Calvin’s take on the

world. Calvin looked on the world and saw utter depravity. The world, he said, is evil. Although at times over the years, we Catholics have from time to time implicitly agreed with Calvin, Pope Francis has called us back to Thomas Aquinas’ stance that the world is graced, though broken, more deprived than depraved. Pope Francis sees God’s grace on-the-loose in the world, alongside sin.

If that’s how we understand the world, then that determines how we go about sharing the Gospel. Scripture scholar Catherine Hilbert names our task as naming grace; looking out upon the world and noticing God’s foot prints and heart prints and hand prints. Francis comments: ‘Anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.’⁶ While Francis speaks of evangelisation, he’s not talking of some special program to persuade or convince people that God exists. He writes: ‘it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of [us] would simply be passive recipients.’⁷ Francis urges ‘each of us [to] find ways to communicate Jesus, wherever we are.’⁸ It’s a relief to read: ‘we should not think that the Gospel message must always be communicated by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content. [Evangelisation] takes place in so many different ways,’ he writes, ‘that it would be impossible to describe or catalogue them all.’⁹

It's hardly surprising that the first step in evangelising, 'which is always respectful and gentle, is personal dialogue.' He sees such people as having been 'listened to and understood, knowing that their particular situation has been placed before God, and that God's word really speaks to their lives.'¹⁰

For instance ...

Let me give an example of what Pope Francis means when he talks about 'every Christian [being] actively engaged in evangelisation.'¹¹ On Australia Day 2013, Brisbane was at the mercy of the driving wind and rain of cyclone Oswald. During a break in the weather, when the sun popped through, Zara and Andrew Burke took their two boys for a walk along Kedron Brook. Andrew was a few metres ahead, with younger son Joseph, while Zara and three-year old, Angus were bringing up the rear. Out of the blue, a tree branch broke off and fell on Angus and his mother. Angus died a few hours later and Zara spent months in Intensive Care. Brisbane wept for Angus and his family.

A week later, Andrew's Eulogy for Angus was printed, in full, in *The Courier Mail*.¹² I can't recall ever seeing that happen before. Thousands of people were deeply moved by their encounter with Andrew Burke's words. Hundreds of comments, profound and moving, were posted on the *Courier Mail* website. What Andrew said in his remarkable Eulogy is what Pope Francis means by sharing the Gospel. After speaking of Angus' vibrant three years, Andrew said: 'The last time Angus was in this church was a few weeks ago. Joseph was having his morning sleep, so it was just the two of us. We sat in the back pew as parents of potentially bored children usually do and Angus did his colouring in. He held my hand as I walked up

for Holy Communion. Zara would worry that I was burdening him with ideas beyond his years, but in response to Angus' questions about God, life and death, I would say that it was only important for him to know that he was always loved and the love that his mummy and daddy gave him came from God.

On the day before Angus died, I took the boys to the creek in their raincoats and we had a great time. Joseph was laughing hysterically every time he jumped in a puddle. I pointed out some mushrooms and we all inspected a dead toad. Zara was jealous of how much fun we had clearly had, so we went down to Kedron Brook again that afternoon and, for the final time, on Monday morning.

When I held Angus' broken body in my arms, I knew that God was already calling him home. I am comforted that in the last moments of his conscious life, Angus was in the presence of his family, throwing sticks in the creek. One moment he was holding the hand of his beautiful mother, and then, in a heartbeat, he was in the hand of God.

In telling this story of faith, Andrew has been, as Pope Francis puts it: 'a spring which spills over and refreshes others.'¹³ This 'being in the heart of the people is not just a part of [our] life or a badge [that we] can take off; it's not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something [we] cannot uproot from [our] being without destroying [our] very selves.' Francis continues: 'we have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by the mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing. All around us', he writes 'we begin to see nurses with soul, teachers with soul, politicians with soul, people who have

chosen deep down to be with others and for others.’¹⁴

Andrew Burke is a parent who spreads the gospel. Many more parents spread the gospel than they may even realise, perhaps as they yarn with other parents while watching their kids play in the local park. Mozart used to refer to himself and his music as ‘the golden flute on the lips of God.’ Musicians can spread the gospel, and it needn’t be through saccharine, sentimental songs. Paul Kelly does it; so does the Boss, Bruce Springsteen. Wayne Bennett shows that football coaches can spread the gospel. I remember hearing a retirement speech from Chris Johns, one of the early Broncos. ‘Wayne Bennett taught me how to be a good footballer.’ Then after a pause, he added: ‘Wayne Bennett taught me to be a good human being.’ How might an accountant or office worker spread the gospel? A retired person? A prisoner? I know a prisoner who still has fifteen years ahead of him before his release. He asks himself each day: how might the Gospel shape the kind of prisoner I am today? John Eales writes a regular column in the *Australian Financial Review*. It often delves deeper than the usual rugby match report. ‘Last Friday’ he wrote, in one column, ‘was the twentieth anniversary of my sister’s death from cancer. Carmel was 20. There is nothing good about a 20 year old dying of anything. I remember her final moments as if they were yesterday. I always will. With her last breath, a tear rolled down her cheek. Sometimes a tear falls on the ground to be forgotten forever, sometimes it nourishes a dream.’¹⁵

My hunch is that, hearing these Australian stories – and the Austrian story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Francis would repeat what he wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*: ‘Everyone

needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.’¹⁶

Conclusion

Let’s take some time to identify stories of encountering the tenderness and mercy of God. As Pope Francis puts it: ‘I never tire of repeating those words of Pope Benedict: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a definite direction”.’¹⁷ We saw such an encounter in Andrew Burke’s story and in Wayne Bennett’s and in John Eales. **When you stop to think about it, I’m sure you’ll be able to put your finger on many such encounters in your own life.** To my way of thinking, this is what Pope Francis means when he asks us to ‘find ways of communicating Jesus, wherever we are.’

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¹ Pope Francis (2013) *Evangelii Gaudium* #3

² *Evangelii Gaudium* #3

³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #8

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #113

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* #119

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #120

⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #120

⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* #121

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #129

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* #128

¹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #120

¹² Andrew Burke, “Tears for A Little Life Cut Short” *The Courier Mail* 6.2.2013

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* #272

¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #273

¹⁵ John Eales “When a loss inspires the will to win.” *The Australian Financial Review* 20 April 2009, p52

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* #44

¹⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* #1

Towards Missionary Discipleship

Below are some questions that may further assist your reflection, group discussion and plans for missionary discipleship. Some questions are suitable for individual reflection and group discussion; some for parish councils, committees or boards.

For reflection and discernment ...

- ☐ 'Thanks solely to this encounter with God's love ... we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption' (#8). How has this 'liberation' opened my heart to those I encounter each day?
- ☐ 'We become fully human when we become more than human ...' (#8). This can seem almost contradictory. What is Pope Francis pointing to with this paradoxical statement?

For sharing and discussion ...

- ☐ The prisoner serving another fifteen years asks himself each day: 'How might the Gospel shape the kind of prisoner I am today?' With the freedom of 'blue skies' how can I make this question my own ... as a parent, family member, worker or citizen of my local community, my country and our beautiful planet, Earth.

- ☐ Pope Francis clearly outlines that sharing the Gospel message is not to be left to specialists and professionals. Rather he sees the first step as 'personal dialogue'. 'Dialogue' is another favourite word of Pope Francis. When I hear the word, or read about it, what are my reactions? What qualities or attributes lead to true dialogue as compared to, say, two monologues?

For formation and mission ...

- ☐ When we are making decisions about our community or our parish how does 'being in the heart of the people' inform and guide our deliberations?
- ☐ Where, when and how in our group or parish are we fulfilling 'the mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing'?