

# Reach further with the gospel discussion guide

based on **Acts 4.1-31** (Linked to sermon of 12/5/24)  
which can be accessed at [www.stjamesbythepark.org/talks](http://www.stjamesbythepark.org/talks)

*This was the third in a series of talks looking at our ‘discipleship triangle’ – Up (love God), In (love each other), Out (love your neighbour) – seeing what we can learn from the early chapters of Acts.*

Intro: Who first shared the good news about Jesus with you? Where? How?

*In chapter 3, Peter & John had gone up to the temple to pray, healed a lame man in Jesus’ name, and spoken about Jesus to the crowds who gathered in amazement.*

In your experience, what has prompted some of the best opportunities to speak of Jesus (eg miracles, personal tragedies, news topics, general conversation etc)?

Read Acts 4.1-12

How do you think Peter & John felt, as they spent the night in prison, and were brought before the court?

Read Lk 12.11-12 Have you ever had a sense of the Holy Spirit giving you the words to say when someone asks you about your faith, as happened to Peter in Acts 4.8?

Why do you think Peter ‘goes for the jugular’ in v10-11? Is it ever right for us to be so direct in confronting people with their sin and rejection of Jesus?

Verse 12 – insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus - was unpopular in the first century, as it is today. In what ways would you say Jesus is unique, when compared to other religious leaders? (Dan briefly highlighted a few ways in the sermon – but there are more too!)

Read Acts 4.13-22

Verse 13 – Dan commented that people expect a vicar (as a trained ‘pro’) to talk about Jesus, but sometimes listen more carefully when it’s an ‘ordinary person’ talking about Jesus. What comments have you had in the past, when you’ve shared some of your faith in Jesus with friends or colleagues?

Verses 18-20 – what are the guidelines or restrictions for talking about faith in your workplace? How do you approach the sensitivities of talking about faith, particularly if there’s a perceived ‘power imbalance’ (eg boss to worker; teacher to pupil; medic to patient etc)? How would you answer the question of v19 in your context?

Read Acts 4.23-31

What strikes you about the believers’ prayer?

Spend some time praying that the Holy Spirit would give you courage to speak the message of Jesus boldly – whether in the context of miraculous healings or everyday conversation!

Optional extra – read the attached appendix from John Dickson’s book “Promoting the gospel” as an example of how conversations and questions can be used to point to Jesus. How might you adapt this sort of approach to suit you?

our promotion of the gospel. They provide the surest account of the content of the gospel. Their presentation of the Saviour offers a rich source of motivation for our own involvement in the work of the gospel. And, all these years later, they still provide unbelievers with the clearest account of what it is Christians believe and do. When friends and family ask to read something that captures the substance of our faith we, like the ancient evangelists just mentioned, could do no better than 'pass on the writing of the divine Gospels'.<sup>103</sup>

None of this is because these writings are more 'inspired' than the rest of God's Word; it is simply because the Gospels are singularly designed to recount the founding message of the Faith (which, of course, is why they were put at the front of the New Testament in the first place). All of the Scriptures point to the gospel and reflect the gospel but only the Gospels *recount* the gospel in all its fullness. The Gospels and the gospel are one.

## Appendix 2

# Gospel bites

**I**N WHAT FOLLOWS I WANT to illustrate how understanding the gospel as presented in Appendix 1 might affect the way we talk about the Faith with those who don't believe. If the gospel basically corresponds to the account of Jesus' life found in the Gospels, it follows that talking about the narrative of Christ will be a natural way of communicating our beliefs to friends and family.

I want to suggest that the sayings and deeds of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, offer a rich source of answers for many of the most common questions put to us by people who don't share our faith. Briefly recounting something relevant Jesus said or did can provide our questioners not only with a satisfying answer but also with an important glimpse into the substance of our faith, Jesus himself. The fact that Jesus is still very highly regarded in wider society means that such 'gospel bites', as you might call them, are particularly helpful in our current context.

Sadly, the 'stories' of Jesus are sometimes viewed as Sunday School material only. As a result, we can often miss their great usefulness for talking with others about the Faith. The reality is, many questions and comments raised by those who don't believe relate quite naturally to events in his life. The following examples will hopefully illustrate what I mean. These 'bites' do not explain the whole gospel (that's something I want to attempt in Appendix 3, 'A modern retelling of the gospel') but they do point toward the gospel in a way that might, Lord willing, encourage further conversation and an opportunity to share the 'whole' gospel.



## A question about sin and forgiveness

Imagine a friend declares (either with sincerity or a touch of pride): 'I've done too many wrong things ever to be a Christian.' How might you respond? The themes of sin, grace and forgiveness are beautifully embodied in many episodes of Jesus' life. Luke 7:36-50, for example, could provide the basis for the following possible reply:

Well, then, you are exactly the sort of person Christ was interested in. He was at the home of a religious leader (Pharisee) one day when a prostitute came in looking for him. She was so overwhelmed she burst out crying. Everyone there wanted to condemn the woman and thought Jesus should do the same. Instead, Jesus condemned his self-righteous host and turned to the woman and said, 'Your sins are forgiven.' He forgave her and she was a changed woman because of it. Christ didn't come for the 'good' people. He came to restore and forgive those willing to admit they are anything but good. Have you ever looked into Jesus' life?

The above reply would take less than a minute to offer. It addressed the questioner's comment and painted a picture of Christ that is biblical and, hopefully, memorable. The reply didn't contain the whole gospel—from Jesus' birth to exaltation. It didn't even share all the details of Luke 7:36-50—remember, this is not meant to be a sermon, just a retelling of something Jesus said and did. In a way, it is similar to what you might do when roughly recounting a scene from one of your favourite movies. Importantly—and I believe this is one of the keys to successful conversation (about anything)—the response tailed off with another question: 'Have you ever looked into Jesus' life?' This provides people with the opportunity to continue the discussion if they wish. It also keeps the conversation focused on the substance of our faith, Jesus.

Other episodes from Jesus' life that lend themselves to speaking about the issue of sin and forgiveness include Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 19:1-10; Luke 23:35-43; John 8:1-11. Why not look the passages up and ponder how you might recount them in a similar conversation.

## A criticism of self-righteousness

To demonstrate the flexibility of the gospel bite, let me use the same narrative (Luke 7:36-50) to illustrate a possible response to a different criticism: 'I haven't got much time for religion; it often seems so judgmental and self-righteous.'

You've probably got more in common with Christ than you think, then. He always criticised that sort of religious attitude. On one occasion he was eating a meal at the home of a religious leader when a prostitute walked in and wept at his feet. She was obviously looking to him for acceptance. The religious leader was outraged but Jesus actually defended the woman. He even offered her forgiveness and insisted that the religious leader was further away from God than this humble woman. 'Religion' might be self-righteous but Christ came to overturn all that stuff. True Christian faith is forgiving not judgmental. Have you ever read much about Christ?

Again, there was no effort in the above example to tell the whole gospel. That would depend on how much more the questioner wanted to know. Lord willing, this minute-long response might open up a larger conversation about an essential aspect of Jesus' mission: to welcome sinners into God's kingdom. Other episodes from Jesus' life that lend themselves to speaking about the issue of judgment and self-righteousness include Matthew 7:1-6; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 15:1-32; 18:9-14.



## **A comment about being the 'religious type'**

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has said to me, 'Look, John, I'm just not the religious type!' The Gospels are full of examples of the 'unreligious' seeing in Jesus the answer to their deepest needs. One such episode is recounted in Matthew 8:5-13. Jesus' gracious dealings with a Roman centurion—a religious pagan and a political enemy—provide clear evidence that being the 'religious type' is irrelevant with Christianity. A possible response follows:

But being the 'religious type' is irrelevant to true Christian faith. Jesus was always attracting and befriending people who were 'not the religious type'. On one occasion a Roman centurion came to Jesus for help. Centurions were about as far from the religious type as you could get in Jesus' day. They were called the 'godless' and were political enemies and occupiers. But this man came to Jesus recognising something unique about this teacher. Jesus welcomed him and promised him a place in the kingdom come—all without being religious. Have you explored much of Christ's teachings?

Other gospel bites on this topic include Matthew 15:21-28 and Luke 5:27-32. I'm sure you will be able to find others.

## **The claim of 'being good'**

Many people today regard themselves as mostly 'good' and, therefore, without need of God's forgiveness or commandments. It is often stated like this: 'I might not be perfect but I am a fairly good person.' Jesus insisted that our fundamental obligation to the Creator is to love our neighbour and love our God (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34). And so I often say something along the following lines:

I appreciate what you're saying but doesn't it depend on what definition of 'good' you're using? Jesus was once asked by a religious scholar what was the single most important thing to do in life. He responded by saying there were actually two things—to love your neighbour as yourself and to love God with all your heart. Being kind and honest with people is only half of it. He insisted we also have to love our Creator. Would you say you're 'good' on Jesus' definition?

Because Jesus is so highly respected in contemporary culture (at least as a teacher), you may find that people are unwilling simply to write-off his words on this topic. This may also provide an opportunity for you to explain that even followers of Christ do not fulfil this command perfectly and so they too need his forgiveness.

The logic of loving God and neighbour as the fundamental obligation of humanity could be teased out in conversation a little more:

According to Jesus, our fundamental obligation in life is to love both God and our neighbour. Most of us would rightly criticise people who claimed to love God but ignored their fellow human beings. On Jesus' teaching, the reverse would be just as open to criticism. Treating people well while ignoring the Creator falls way short of what Jesus taught was our obligation. So, I guess it depends on whose definition of 'good' we're going to accept. Have you ever looked into Jesus' life and teaching?

## **The issue of pluralism**

I think most of us would agree that pluralism—the belief that all religions point to God—is one of the major challenges put to modern Christians. It appears in so many forms: 'You Christians



are so arrogant as to think you alone have the truth!' or 'My own view is more open: I like to think of all religions as containing their own truth' or 'What makes your religion so special when there are so many Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in the world?' There is no way a simple 'gospel bite' is going to settle an issue this explosive. Nevertheless, one important aspect of our response might involve 'blaming' Jesus for the views we hold as Christians. It was, after all, Jesus who made such grandiose claims. Christians can't help it if they find themselves convinced by what Jesus said. Any passage in which Jesus claims universal authority is pertinent to this topic (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 14:60-65; Luke 24:45-47; John 14:5-6). In the following example I quote the famous passage from John's Gospel:

I understand what you're saying but it's important to realise that Christians don't think they possess the truth; not at all. They simply look at Jesus' life and find themselves convinced by his teaching and deeds. I mean, Jesus was the one who said he had universal authority over the world. He was once asked by a friend about the way to God. He replied 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' Christians didn't make that up. You can't really blame a Christian for taking seriously the words of Christ, can you? What do you make of Jesus?

A more philosophical approach might refer to John 14:8-10 where Jesus claims to be one with God the Father:

You ask: 'What makes Christianity so special?' Well, I think it boils down to a unique claim that Jesus made. One of his followers once asked him to show them what God was like. You know what Jesus said in reply? He said, 'If you have seen me, you have seen God the Father.' Jesus alone of all the great religious founders said that he himself was the revelation of God. People don't have to rely on religion or guesswork; they can just look at

his life and see what God is like. Jesus is the 'photo' of God, if you like. For me, that's what separates Jesus from the other religious claims. Have you ever thought much about Christ?

Such replies will not satisfy all of the questions relating to pluralism. For instance, people may respond to the above 'gospel bite' with: 'Yes, but how do you know all that stuff about Jesus is true in the first place?' This will give you an opportunity to talk about the historical reliability of Jesus and the Gospels. Christianity, uniquely among the world religions, is an historical faith. When people ask questions about history, they are on our turf. In any case, an answer similar to those above may provide a starting point for a helpful discussion about the truly unique claims of Jesus.

## The problem of pain and suffering

The question of suffering looms large in the modern mind, particularly in light of disasters such as the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Many of the issues need to be dealt with philosophically (does suffering disprove God's existence?) or theologically (is God powerless to do anything?). In no way am I suggesting that all, or even most, of the questions people might ask us relate immediately to some action or teaching of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of this particular problem that leads naturally to a discussion about Christ's life and, in particular, his death. Regardless of what we don't know about God's plans in this world, we do know his intentions. Jesus' sufferings provide a powerful counterpoint to the assumption that God might be distant, cruel and uninvolved. Hence, one aspect of my answer to the problem of pain and suffering comes back to the picture of



God we have in Jesus' passion recorded in Mark 15:21-37:

I don't have all the answers about suffering. But one thing I hold to, especially when I'm going through hard times, is that the God of Christianity is not distant and disinterested. In Jesus, God himself experienced human betrayal, horrible injustice and a gruesome death. The scene of his crucifixion, as described in the Gospels is very moving. He bears incredible insult and injury and continues to act compassionately. This, according to the Bible, is the God who rules all things. He willingly experiences what we experience. This God is able to sympathise with those who suffer not simply because he is all-knowing but because he has experienced pain first-hand. This helps me trust God when I don't understand what he's doing in the world. Have you ever looked at Jesus' life and death?

As I just said, in no way do I think this response answers the question of suffering. It simply provides a snapshot of one important aspect of the biblical notion of God as humble, loving and 'familiar with suffering' (Isaiah 53:3).

I am not recommending you attempt a 'gospel bite' each time you get into a spiritual conversation. The point of this appendix is simply to demonstrate that Jesus' life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection are a rich source of answers to some common contemporary questions. Recounting a relevant part of that narrative may provide your friends with some satisfying answers. It may also open up an opportunity to outline the gospel more fully. In the final Appendix I want offer an example of what this might look like in a modern context.

## Appendix 3

# A modern retelling of the gospel

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN ATTEMPT to outline the gospel more fully. I have written this final appendix as if speaking to an unbeliever. I don't expect anyone to use these words in their own gospel conversations, or even to follow the logical steps I take below. I am simply wanting to illustrate what it might look like in a modern context to explain what the New Testament calls the gospel: the news about how God has opened his kingdom through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### God of common sense

Belief in God is common sense. This is not intended as bait for atheists. It is simply a historical observation: belief in God or gods is a universal reality throughout time. Like the fascination with art and music, or our quest for intimacy and social organization, reverence for a Creator is one of the few shared traits of the whole human family. Even today, 4 out of 5 Australians acknowledge the existence of God; only about 1 in 20 describe themselves as atheists.<sup>104</sup>

Of course, the proposition God exists is not provable in a mathematical sense, nor can it be tested by science. Like love, art and human consciousness itself, this truth sits outside the reach of empirical testing. It is a macro-truth which makes sense of the