**Island Bay Presbyterian Church, Wellington, New Zealand**

**Sermon: Gateway 1 Revelation Feb 18th 2018**

**Romans 10:9-15**

As you’ve heard already, we’ve gone purple up the front of church here today because of Lent – Lent being the season leading up to Easter when some Christians intentionally take time out to examine their lives, or fast from something that might be harmful or distracting.

For, as Christians, we’re supposed to be regularly reflecting on our lives and habits and values, *but often we don’t*, so it’s helpful to some people to have a time each year to be disciplined and do that.

***And as for individuals, so for church communities!***

Two years ago we at this church sat down and reflected quite deeply about our life together and our calling as the Body of Christ in this place, and we identified five heart areas that we felt were core to what we do as the IBPC (Island Bay Presbyterian church). They are…

1. Worship

2. Fellowship

3. Discipleship

4. Social Justice

5. Evangelism

At that time we felt we were doing okay at Worship and Fellowship, and that the two areas the Spirit was calling us to focus in on were Discipleship and Social Justice.

A few weeks ago we met again to review and pray and to set a *new* focus for the next two years, and this time we felt called to emphasise **discipleship** again, but also **evangelism** as well.

And I’m starting today’s sermon with a bit of an explanation of that vision, because, *what kind of images come to mind when I mention the word evangelism*???

Evangelism can be a scary word with lots of negative stereotypes around it of imposing the Good News of Jesus on people in insensitive and judgemental ways – ways that take the good news and make it bad news… We don’t want to do that!

Rather, we see evangelism and discipleship as being two pretty similar things, both being a call to respond to the Good News of Jesus.

For those who already have opened their lives to Jesus, it is a call to go deeper in the journey with God, to follow Christ as disciples ever further out on the road of faith.

For those who have not met Jesus as a living presence in their life, or who have forgotten something they once knew as a child, it is an invitation to take a first step on that journey with Christ.

“Here is the Good News of Jesus; here is life! Can you see it? How are you going to respond to it? Will you open your heart to God and seek what is so easy to find?”

Now we don’t want to do more stuff as a church (we already do heaps), we just want to be intentional in keeping the call to evangelism and discipleship in the things that we do already.

Is there an open-ended question in what we are doing? Is there a chance to sit with what has been said? Is there a signpost to a group that will pray with you or explore these issues with you at more depth? Is there a *challenge* to respond to and *space* to go further in some way?

That is the vision!

We will be giving feedback once a quarter on how we have been experimenting with this, and as I said, we are giving ourselves two years to experiment with it. Hopefully we will have found something that fits with our community and what the Spirit is doing here by the end of that time!

*However*! (There will be a few “however”s in today’s sermon…)

However, in order to ***respond*** to God and the good news about Jesus, people have to ***hear*** it first. There needs to be something to respond to.There is a quote attributed to St Frances of Assisi: “Preach the good news at all times, if necessary use words.”

We (I include myself in this) are really good at preaching with our actions. This church is awesome at practically loving, supporting, getting alongside and going the extra mile for people. We serve our community, we support those who are in need, and we show people the love of God. We have an awesome foundation of actions!

But usually, for people to really understand and consider our hope in the love of God, we do need to speak, we do need to put our faith into words – I think we have earned the right to do this, but we’re maybe not so strong on knowing how.

And this is where our reading today from Romans 10:9-15 comes in, and it has a very interesting progression.

Paul is writing and he says that *all who confess Jesus as Lord and who call on the name of the Lord will be saved*.

But… how can they call on him if they do not **believe** in him? How can they believe if they haven’t **heard** about him? How can they hear if no-one **proclaims** him? And how can people proclaim if they are not **sent**?

Now Christianity teaches that all people everywhere are surrounded by the grace and love of God at all times, but, Christianity also teaches that God doesn’t force him/herself on people. Usually God waits to be invited, waits for people to call on the name of the Lord before God enters their life.

But, how can they call on the name of the Lord and receive light and salvation, if they don’t believe? *And they don’t need to believe very much*! We don’t have to pass a Bible exam! A simple “God help me” uttered in a time of crisis, if sincere, is enough – forall those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved (you just might not be saved from the things you think you need to be saved from; God tends to have different priorities to us).

But (Paul goes on), how can they believe in the Lord, even just that little bit, if they haven’t *heard* about God and Jesus?

How can they hear if no-one *tells them*?

And how can people tell about the good news of Jesus and the love of God if they are not *sent*…?

Which, interestingly, (and perhaps surprisingly) concludes that list by bringing us back here, back to the church community, to the gathering from which you are sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord each Sunday morning…

Last week we prayed for and sent out the leaders of our Sunday Club and Youth Group for a new year. This morning we sent Amber and Susan out in prayer to take up new missional jobs with Presbytery.

So, part of sending is to acknowledge and pray for and support people, and the last part of a church service, which we call the **benediction,** fulfils part of that role… For as we close the service each Sunday with the benediction we are acknowledging that we are all agents of God’s grace, we are all bearers of the light and the good news of Jesus, and a blessing is prayed over us to be who we are in Christ, as we go forth.

***But maybe we could more actively support each other in this?***

As for Amber, Susan, our Sunday club leaders and our Youth Group leaders, please do go up to them. Please do ask them how they are going in their roles, and if you can support them and pray for them… but can we do that with each other as well?

“How are you going on the road of discipleship as a follower of Jesus? How is life treating you? Can I support you and pray for you in your Christian life in any way?”

For how can people proclaim the good news in word and in deed, how can people be light bearers in the dark places of the world if they are not sent? If they do not have a community that equips them and supports them and prays for them? For as we know the road can be hard.

*However*! It also has to be said, in case anyone is getting stressed, that most of us are not **evangelists**.

Some of us can talk about God to others easily and naturally, but not many. Most of us would get all nervous and speak out of anxiety which might not be that helpful. So in our focus for the next two years we are mainly thinking about how we do it together, how we articulate the good news and include an invitation to respond to that in the things we do as a group.

Yet, still, in our daily life, opportunities will arise from time to time where we can be an agent of God’s love and grace to others, and this is a beautiful thing.

In Rom 10 Paul quotes Isaiah saying: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.” This doesn’t mean that Paul has been checking out people’s feet and has proven that people who talk about Jesus have more attractive feet than the national average. No! Paul is just reminding us that it is a blessed and wonderful thing to be part of another life opening their heart to the love of God. Introducing a friend to someone funny at a party is a nice thing to do, introducing a life to God when an opportunity arises is an even nicer thing to do.

To conclude today…

Over Lent we are doing a series of sermons on **gateways** we are called to pass through on the life of discipleship. For God’s Kingdom isan upside down Kingdom – in God’s Kingdom the first will be last and the last will be first; in God’s Kingdom those who lay down their life will gain it; in God’s Kingdom those who give will receive.

God’s Kingdom doesn’t always work the way we think it should, and in the journey of discipleship we need to shrug off the preconceptions of our culture, learn to trust God, and take steps of faith.

In this series we will be calling some of these counter-cultural attitudes “gateways” because they present an invitation but also an obstacle on the journey. And the first gateway for today is the gateway of revelation.

**Revelation**! The journey all begins with revelation – God and Jesus *revealing themselves* to us.

Despite how clever or strong or rich we are, we can’t enter God’s kingdom in our own strength. We can’t think our way into God’s Kingdom; we can’t force our way into God’s Kingdom; we can’t buy our way into God’s Kingdom.

For yes, Paul says that people need to **call on the name of the Lord** to be saved, that they can’t call if they don’t believe, that they can’t believe if they haven’t heard, that they can’t hear if no-one proclaims, and that we can’t proclaim if we aren’t sent… but*,* we need to hold that alongside something *Jesus* said.

In **John 6:41-44** Jesus is beginning his ministry; he’s preaching near his home town, and some people won’t accept what he is saying and start getting angry.

Jesus then says to them a fascinating thing. He basically says “chill out, because you cannot believe in me and my name unless God draws you to me”.

*No-one can believe in Jesus unless God draws them*.

So, in Romans 10, Paul is telling us that God wants us to partner with the Spirit and be agents of grace and good news in the world. That we are to send each other out, praying for and supporting each other to proclaim the truth about Jesus in words and deeds, in the hope that others may hear, may believe, and may call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

But, Jesus is reminding us that ***it doesn’t all*** ***depend*** ***on us***. *God* saves people not us! Saving people is not our responsibility.

We can urge people to open their eyes, see the love that surrounds them, and encourage them to open their hearts to that love, but then it is up to God to *reveal* himself to them. God’s revelation, and that person’s free will in how they *engage* with that revelation, are the key players.

So, that’s gateway 1 for today - the gateway of **revelation**.

The path of discipleship begins with revelation, with God and Jesus revealing themselves to us and drawing us to them. It starts with God, it doesn’t start with us.

However… *usually* that step involves other people…

And Romans 10 lays out a framework for how God wants to partner with us! The Spirit wants to use our words and deeds to help prompt people to seek out these revelations – and if you seek, *you will find*.

How do we feel about that? What do we think about this vision of evangelism?

Are we willing to take another step out on the road of discipleship this morning, and to ask Jesus to guide us? To reveal his will in this matter to us, and to open our eyes to ways in which we can be agents of grace through both word and deed, in the lives around us?