

The gospel is God's power

"Start a new congregation in the growing west of Port Macquarie!"... that is our job description! But how? How does a church come into being?

This is not academic. The Diocese is aware that there are several growing towns where the same project could be undertaken and where the same question can be asked. Here are my thoughts for what they are worth.

Some may think "just start a church service and go from there". Others, aware that fewer people relate to the traditional church these days, may say "change your style of church service". Still others, keen to reach the community may suggest "start doing acts of service in the community". These suggestions and others will all need to be considered, but more fundamentally, I suggest it is through the sincere and caring proclamation of his gospel that the Lord Jesus brings his church into being.

Consider the first Day of Pentecost described in Acts 2. Many things are unique about that day but it is worth noting the sequence of events. The disciples spoke to people about the greatness of God in everyday language [verse 11]. They called on people to repent [verse 38]. They were genuine in the way they spoke [verse 40]. Those who responded gathered "with glad and sincere hearts" [verse 46]. And so a church was born!

The importance of God's word in birthing the church is affirmed in Acts 6 by the priority the first disciples placed on the word of God and prayer, even ahead of [though not at the expense of] acts of loving service. Paul, the great 'church planter', was "not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God". The gospel and prayer must be our two key 'tools' in our task at Port.

Several things must be said at this point. The gospel is not just a cold formula to be trumpeted. Rather the gospel is shared best through relationships and friendships by those with love as their motive. It's truths are applied to our hearts through the Holy Spirit. It points us to the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Through the gospel God produces all sorts of good fruit in peoples lives. And what God does in people through the gospel is part of a grander plan to renew the whole of creation.

So, what is the gospel? My reading of the Bible suggests that the gospel is firstly a proclamation: it is royal news that expects to be published. For Isaiah, speaking to God's people, the words of the messenger on the mountains were "Your God reigns".

With the coming of Christ, the royal message becomes "Jesus is Lord". Such was the focus on the lordship of Christ in the apostles' teaching that in Thessalonica they were accused of treason: "They are all defying Caesars decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus".

The proclamation of the gospel involves a call to respond: it calls us to humble ourselves before the King. So "Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God. 'The time has come' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel'."

There is a timeless truth here: even David, himself a king!, knew that he had a King over him, before whom the only fitting response was to have "a humble and contrite heart" [Psalm 51:17]. In short, the gospel is a proclamation to all humankind, "all nations", of the kingship of God.

This is my priority in church planting: to speak of the servant King who calls each of us to place him at the centre of our life choices. By so doing we find life "to the full".

We need to take care that we don't exchange the fruit of the gospel for the gospel itself. For instance no amount of community service on its own will build Christ's kingdom any more than will the excellent work of the Rotary Club. Care for the community is a fruit of the gospel, not the gospel itself.

That said however, from the gospel of the kingdom will flow all the blessings and responsibilities of kingdom-living: the forgiveness of sins, friendship with God and the living out of kingdom values, such as forgiving my "enemy", joining the Court Support team, choosing to drink fair trade coffee, etc. The gospel truthfully shared and humbly received will bear such good fruit.

The gospel is first and foremost a declaration that, in Christ, it is God who reigns as the wonderful King, not me. As Paul says of Christ "all things were created through him and for him". Whenever a person repents, trusts, and follows Jesus, the kingdom and its blessings flow.

The application of this, on the ground, in western Port Macquarie, is now our prayerful challenge.