

PRAY SERVE AND PROCLAIM

(Colossians 4.2-18)

So this man is being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy main road. Suddenly, the traffic lights turn orange, just up ahead. He can maybe just beat the red light by putting his foot through the gas pedal and racing through the junction. What is he going to do? He does what you would do. He does the right thing and screeches to a stop at the crossroads.

But the woman behind him is furious! She brakes so sharply that she drops the mobile she was holding. She leans on her horn, screaming abuse about missing her chance to get through the traffic lights.

She is still ranting like a lunatic, when she hears a tap on her window. She looks up and sees a very stern looking policeman. He orders her out of her car. He takes her to the police station where she is searched, finger printed, photographed and placed in custody.

After a couple of hours, a security guy approaches the cell and opens the door. She is escorted back to reception where the arresting officer is waiting with her personal effects.

He says, "I'm very sorry madam, there's been a mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were leaning on your horn, and swearing at the poor guy in front of you. I noticed your '*Don't follow me, follow Jesus*' bumper sticker. I thought you must have stolen the car!"

Like that impatient driver, I am quite sure my efforts at sharing my faith could be better. How about you?

In this year when we have put on a family fun day, delivered several St Mary's News bulletins to the whole village and started Messy Church adding to our Sunday services, community lunch, drop in, Little Ted, Godzone and all the rest – we could say that we are certainly not shy about sharing our faith.

And yet, growing in confidence to share our faith more effectively is what our MDT identified as the area to strengthen most if we were going to grow as a church.

That was always a concern in the first century church too. Paul in our reading (v3-4) says he wants to proclaim the message of Christ *clearly* and he urges the Christians he writes to, to make their conversation, not complaining, or negative, but full of grace. He encourages the Colossian Christians to learn how to answer people when the subject of faith comes up.

So we've had Judy Hirst here over Lent and I'm sure her visits will be a springboard to becoming more confident in sharing our faith with others. I want to talk in a moment about two ways in particular.

But first let me tell you about Doctor Marze. Kathie started a district nursing job about ten years ago. The first day, she came home and said, "I think my new boss, is a Christian." She had worked with him *just one day* and he hadn't spoken *one* word to her about Christianity in any shape or form. So I said "How can you tell?"

I thought maybe she would say he had a cross on his lapel or a poster on his office wall or a Bible on his desk. Not at all. It was the way he spoke to people, his gentleness, his fairness, his real interest in others, it was the fact he didn't care that his car was old and beat up, and that he was so full of joy. She later discovered that he was indeed a Christian.

Do you think the people you spend most time with know you're a Christian? If they do know, do you think you're a good advert for your faith? If they don't, like the impatient driver in the story I started with, would they be surprised if they found out? If you never told people you were a Christian, would they ever guess?

I like chameleons. A chameleon is bug-eyed lizard that changes colour to suit its environment. So if it's on a green background, it goes green; on a brown background, it's brown. Someone claims they did an experiment once, putting one on a tartan background, and according to the legend it exploded!

But there are some people who are, in effect, chameleon Christians. Put them in an environment which is predominantly Christian, where everyone behaves Christian kind of way, and so will they. But once they are in an environment which is not Christian they are indistinguishable from everyone else.

I think we should stand out. And the two really easy ways we are going to share our faith with this village are both to do with prayer.

Isn't it noticeable how, in our reading, effective outreach was 100% connected with prayer? Verse 4 says "Pray that I may proclaim Christ clearly, as I should." Verse 2 says "Devote yourselves to prayer." The dictionary defines that word devote as "to give all or most of one's time or resources to (a person or activity)." That doesn't mean we all have to go and live in a monastery – but it does show that coordinated prayer inside the church is closely related to reaching people outside it.

The first really easy way we are going to share our faith with this village is what we call prayer visiting. It's really easy; we've already done it before and we know it works. Anyone able bodied person can be part of it.

In case you don't know what is involved, it goes like this: one person pops a card round to about 30-40 homes in a particular sector of the village. It takes about 20 minutes. The card says that in two Sundays time someone in the church will include in the Sunday prayers anything the people in that sector ask for. It might be for a sick relative. It might be for an anxious friend. It might be for a bereaved colleague.

Then, the following week, two people ring on each doorbell, say a friendly "Hi" and collect the cards. It takes about an hour and a half. One of those two people will have done prayer visiting before and can do the talking.

Our experience of covering the whole village several times now is that, overwhelmingly, people are grateful that the church bothers to take an interest in them. It builds little bridges of friendship. It enhances the profile of Saint Mary's in the village as a caring, praying, friendly community with a human face.

We want to start doing this again in a few weeks' time and we'd love for as many as possible to sign up to help. If there aren't enough people who sign up we simply won't be able to do it, as it's too much for a dedicated few to manage alone.

The second way we're going to share our faith in the coming year is through a project called TryPraying.

Do you know anyone who has in any kind of worry or concern in their lives? I mean someone who doesn't come to church or have any faith connection at all? It might be an unemployed daughter or a sick husband or a friend with financial worries. Or a neighbour awaiting tests from the hospital or a grandson getting

bullied at school or someone recently bereaved. Have you ever wondered what might happen in their life if they prayed every day for one week about their situation?

We have ordered 200 booklets, plus 200 youth versions called Try Praying. And at the end of this month, right through to the end of May, we're going to be giving everyone here a couple of copies to try for a week – and then we're going to ask you to pray about who you might pass them on to. This could be a brilliant way for people to encounter God in their lives.

Several cities have had coordinated campaigns with this booklet and there have been some amazing testimonies of people who have seen God move in their lives.

So, as I conclude, I want to say that our village and communities are not impossible to reach. They are just hard to reach if we stay in church. This year, let's have faith and courage to move out of our comfort zones a bit more and let's see what God does when we do.