

Church Re-Envisioned

Happy new year! Twelve months ago, the smell of smoke was only just being eclipsed by torrential rain, but news outlets were starting to report that a new respiratory virus was spreading. We could not have dreamed that our lives – as we knew it – would be upended. In the space of a couple of months, we had to get used to new ways of doing and being: from personal hygiene practices, wearing face masks, schooling, working, holidaying and travelling. Up to that time, many of us probably didn't think there was any other way of doing 'work' – let alone, ways of doing and being 'church'. We have had to look at life through a different lens – and adjust our lives – in light of that new reality and the public health messages.

GETTING STARTED: What has been the most significant life change that you and your family / housemates had to make, over the last 12 months? How well have you (and others) adapted to that change? What have you struggled with? In what ways have the changes been beneficial?

READ: ACTS 3:11-26

🗨️ What did you notice / what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

🗨️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

❗ Phil referred to two historical speeches in his sermon: the "*I have a dream*"¹ speech delivered by Rev Dr Martin Luther King in 1963 and "*The Finest Hour*"² speech, delivered by UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1940, in the wake of defeat at Dunkirk. Words have the power to inspire and challenge people, catalysing them to action. In the last two decades, two speeches by Australian Prime Ministers have particularly stood out: Kevin Rudd apologised to the stolen generations³ in 2008 and Julia Gillard confronted sexism and misogyny.⁴ Phil said that powerful messages require clarity, courage, passion and insight. People will not necessarily agree with the message – and some may even be so threatened by the message – that they will 'shoot the messenger.' But a powerful message will challenge our presuppositions and even our entrenched views. We may be forced to accept that past beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours have been wrong. If we allow the message to challenge the essence of who we are, we must inevitably take steps to change.

🗨️ Think back to a time when you were challenged by a friend or family member, (eg about something you did or were doing, an attitude you expressed or something that you had said, that was 'off base' or unacceptable.) What was the context? What was the result? What actions did you take, to change?

❗ In today's passage, a crowd quickly gathered after witnessing that a lame beggar had been healed. Even in the temple precinct, surrounded by Jewish leaders who had breathed a sigh of relief after Jesus' death, Peter took the opportunity to speak, addressing the crowd. We can only suspect that Peter's nerves kicked in, his palms were sweating and his heart was beating hard. He was a fisherman, not a trained preacher or orator. Yet, just as God had used Peter and John to heal this unassuming beggar, God would use Peter, to challenge the crowd about who Jesus really is.

🗨️ Consider the following words, written by the apostle Peter, many years later. What do they tell us about seizing the moment and the opportunity to share our faith? What does he say should be our attitude, particularly to those around us, who might be listening to us? Why is consistency between our life and our message, absolutely essential? What does he say about the need for courage?

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. (1 Pet 3:13-17)

¹ King, Rev Dr ML (Aug 28 1963) "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety#:~:text=%20have%20a%20dream%20today.&text=Dr...KING%3A%20I%20have&text=KING%3A%20I%20have%20a%20dream%20that%20one%20day%20every%20valley,This%20is%20our%20hope.>

² Churchill, W. (4 June 1940), "The Finest Hour", delivered in the House of Commons

<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/#:~:text=We%20shall%20go%20on%20to,fight%20in%20the%20fields%20and>

³ Rudd, K. (13 Feb 2008) Sorry Speech, Parliament House, Canberra.

<https://info.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>

⁴ Gillard, J. (10 Oct 2012) Sexism & Misogyny Speech, Parliament House, Canberra.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/transcript-of-julia-gillards-speech-20121010-27c36.html>

❗ Jesus' ministry and his teaching about the kingdom of God was radical in his time and intrigued people. For the most part, people – including Peter – struggled to adjust, to view life through Jesus' lens. Because of preconceived ideas, they struggled to understand who Jesus was. Many saw him as a good teacher, healer and / or miracle worker. Some saw him as the means by which they'd fulfil Jewish political expectations. In today's passage, Peter's speech is not just **intentionally Christ-centred**. Peter shifted the focus from himself; it wasn't about him and it wasn't "by our own power or piety that we had made him walk." (Acts 3:12) While Peter acknowledged that faith in Jesus name had led to the man being healed (Acts 3:16), that wasn't the ultimate point. Peter was pointing people to even more important things about the person and work of Jesus.

💬 Jesus once asked the question: "who do people say that I am?" (Matt 16:13-20) If you asked some of your friends that question, how do you think they would answer it? What does Peter's speech tell us about the person and work of Jesus, including who Jesus is?

❗ Phil commented that **Peter's message was grounded in Scripture**. The Word of God is 'God-breathed' (2 Tim 3:16); it is living, active and powerful. (Heb 4:12)

💬 What do we learn from how Peter used Scripture, in speaking to people?

💬 When Jesus healed people who were blind, deaf and lame, he fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (eg Is 35), but he also personally enacted the work of God as redeemer and healer. What words did Peter use, to teach the crowd about God's desire to bless, heal and restore of people? What picture of God did Peter give the crowd? What vision did he paint, about God's intended plan for humanity?

❗ Some would say that the Bible – and preaching of the Bible – is irrelevant to people now. Phil talked about how the Bible is still as relevant to the lives of people, particularly the issues and circumstances that each of us face, as it was when it was written. The challenge for us, is to do the 'bridge-building', to help people understand that **the Bible is applicable and relevant** to their lives.

💬 Think of some life situations that you are dealing with at the moment. Maybe you are newly married. Maybe you have conflicts at work. Maybe you are dealing with habits or addictions that you don't want anyone to know about. What are some things that the Bible has to say about your situation? What is a way in which you could share Biblical wisdom with a friend or colleague who is struggling with a situation (without shoving the Bible down their throat)?

❗ Phil talked about Peter's speech being **interactive** and relational. He intentionally used the words 'you', 'your', 'we' and 'brothers'. He was talking with his own people, in language they understood and referring to current events that they related to. His speech was not abstract; while he had some hard things to say to these people, he was also connecting with them.

💬 If you sit in many university lectures, the aim of the lecturer is to convey information, but not to relate to the students. There are probably many people who feel that they cannot 'relate' to Christians, because of experiences when Christians have 'lectured' them about the Bible. Have you experienced this? How did you (or the people around you) respond to the person who was speaking?

❗ In Acts 3:19, Peter issued a challenge to respond to his message: "Repent, therefore, and turn to God ..." Phil said that the message should be **transformational**, in that it should lead to change. He painted a vision of lives being changed by the work of God in their lives: of sins being wiped out, refreshing, being saved, being restored together with the people of God and of receiving blessing. The choice to change is one that is inspired by the knowledge that God has a plan for us to live better lives, in relationship with him.

💬 Revelation 21 and Is 11:6-9 talk about the new heaven and new earth, where the impacts of sin are wiped out, replaced by peace, harmony and beauty. Does this picture inspire you? Or does it seem too good to be true?

REFLECTION: A lot of the time, it's easier to keep doing what we've been doing, rather than making the decision to change. We might hate our jobs, but haven't got the energy to go through the job application process. Change might only happen, because someone else forces us to change. Take a piece of paper and jot down some things about yourself that you are unhappy about. A relationship? A habit? Something else? Write down one action that you can take, to make a positive change. Commit that decision to God.