

## Readings for the Gathering

### The Epistle

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

<sup>16</sup> For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! <sup>17</sup> If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. <sup>18</sup> What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

### Paul's Use of His Freedom

<sup>19</sup> Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

### The Gospel

#### Mark 1:29-39 Jesus Heals Many

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. <sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. <sup>31</sup> So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. <sup>32</sup> That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sic sick and demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered at the door, <sup>34</sup> and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

#### Jesus Prays in a Solitary Place

<sup>35</sup> Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and his companions went to look for him, <sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" <sup>38</sup> Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else —to the nearby villages —so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." <sup>39</sup> So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

### Contemporary Reading 'Here we are' from *Seeking Aliveness*

by Brian McLaren

Picture the unfolding of creation. Imagine how uncountable nuclei and electrons and sister particles danced and whirled. Imagine how space dust coalesced into clouds, and how clouds coalesced into galaxies, and how galaxies began to spin, sail, and dance through space. Imagine how in galaxy after galaxy, suns blazed, solar systems twirled, and worlds formed. Around some of those worlds, moons spun, and upon some of those worlds, storms swirled, seas formed, and waves rolled. And somewhere in between the smallest particles and the largest cosmic structures, here we are, in this galaxy, in this solar system, on this planet, in this story, around this table, at this moment – with this chance for us to breathe, think, dream, speak, and be alive together.

Today, think of yourself as surfing on the leading edge of a magnificent creation that has been unfolding for billions of years.

### Reflection

"Here we are, in this galaxy, in this solar system, on this planet, in this story, around this table, at this moment – with this chance for us to breathe, think, dream, speak, and be alive together." What a privilege it is to be alive at this moment in time.

What then can help us to breathe, think, dream, speak, and be alive together?

As I sat down during the week to start this reflection there seemed to be a block. Couldn't work out what it was, then found myself turning to this diagram in your order of service. Just bear with me for a moment. I can see that the first half of what I say will sound like a business motivation seminar but I have a deeper purpose.

Simon Sinex points out that we often know *what* we do – represented by the outer circle. What do we do here? We gather and sing and reflect and study and give and advocate and lobby, greet each other, bond with each other – we do a lot of things. We can also be very articulate about *how* we like those things to be done, represented by the middle circle; we lobby *assertively*, we advocate *respectfully*, we reflect *theologically*, we welcome *inclusively*. In fact, the more I think about it, we are *very* particular about how things are done here.

And as I mentioned in the blog this week we as a church have also *declared* a lot of things about our identity – we are non nuclear, peace loving, inclusive, supportive of fair trade and accredited as a living wage employer to mention some declarations. But in response to both these lists of what we do and how we do it, the burning question is “Why”? – the central circle of Sinex's diagram.

Why do we come here rather than go to another church? Why do we come to church at all? Why do we find ourselves unable to stop following a spiritual path even though that path may differ in shape and size and sometimes direction. Why bother to do all these things, and, why, if we cease doing them for a time do we find ourselves drifting back to some form of spiritual connection?

This is where I could continue on a business orientation and convince us all how to better “sell” the church to those who do not come - but that is not my purpose here.

There is an important connection between this business model and what has been happening to the church. In general the Christian church has assumed that the “why” is not for mere humans to work out. That God is the “why” or sets the “why” of church and Christianity. We are to deal with the *how* we will do this and *what* we will do.

But it is becoming obvious to me we've put the right things in the wrong circle!

In the “Why” circle Christendom has put (without thinking about it too much) **God** (the kind that lives in heaven), learning from a reliable holy book, the **Bible**, **Praying** (to God out there), regular attendance and commitment to **Church**.

I'm coming to the conclusion that widely through Christendom we have assumed that is “why” we embrace the Christian way – the reason why we are Christian.

Then we have argued, usually quite a lot, about *how* we will do those things and *what* we will do; and they have proliferated and expanded and become very different from church to church and community to community and individual to individual.

This worked alright when the objects or activities we had at the core as our “why” as a religion worked for us. Increasingly however, one by one they've suffered in their reputation, relevance and satisfaction scores for many in our society who used to be or would have otherwise been church goers.

The concept of that external God in the heavens has taken a knock since the Enlightenment. From the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Bible has lost its reputation as a supernaturally infallible historically accurate document. For those who are unconvinced about God, their previous form of praying to an all-seeing, all-knowing and all-powerful God has also lost its lustre. Church has lost ground since other activities compete with it for patronage on Sundays. Ecclesiastical language has become outmoded compared with contemporary language. Mores in society have altered and the

church may be resented for setting what seem to be unattainable targets of morality while at the same time, the church has lost its clean good image as different forms of abuse are identified and exposed.

So, for society in general, gradually over time there is nothing left in the why circle which would convince them that church might be a place where their why could be. And we who are still brought to the Christian spiritual path by a deep-seated yearning find we cannot talk well with such people because those inner circle entities are no longer agreed common ground between them and us.

I suggest Christendom put the wrong eggs in the “why” basket. Those eggs I want to suggest actually belonged in the “how” basket.

The central circle of the “why” question is still empty but we have a clue as to what should have been there, in fact what was there all the time only we didn’t notice. What should have been there all along, all through the ages of Christendom since the fourth century. We needed to have guarded that space and kept it free for the really important “why”. What is it that we really want, why do we exist? Why do we need? Why do we yearn? What do we follow the Christian religion or more generally the spiritual path, at all?

What is the question which fits these how answers? What is the question which gives us the answers ‘God’, ‘Bible’, ‘Prayer’ and ‘Church’?

The “why” questions behind the “how” processes are slightly differently expressed by each person. They are deep within our psyche. They resonate when we hear them. They all have to do something with the meaning of our lives and we feel alive when we access them and when the activities we encounter address them directly

**Why** then would you interact with God or Prayer or the Bible or Church (among other activities?) It will be because your “why” for being on a spiritual path of any kind is to find the *meaning of your life*. Or you might tell me your deepest yearning is to *“Connect with the Centre”* or to *“Discover essence within existence”* or that you are *“Seeking Aliveness”*.

That’s the kind of “why” which is deep in people’s hearts. I believe it always has been, from the first moment when the archetypal parents of humanity Adam and Eve reached for the knowledge of Good and Evil.

While for many years of Christendom, traditional, orthodox ‘God’, ‘Bible’, ‘Church’, ‘Prayer’ filled that deep yearning because the way they were presented was compatible with our culture, we didn’t notice those eggs were in the wrong basket.

Now that they are *not as compatible and helpful* for so many, now ill-fitting for many in this postmodern age, we need to rediscover our real “why” and to listen to what is the “why” at the hearts of those who never come here. **Then** we go to these traditional values and discover how they now *in this day and age and time* can be used to satisfy that deep, deep “Why” which rings down through the centuries in human hearts, the question humankind has always asked though we may not have known it.

This is not following the latest spiritual fad or fashion. Far from it. It is digging deep, deep down to find the archetypal spiritual yearning within the very depths of humankind.

And because ‘God, Church, Bible and Prayer’ are now not dominating the central circle but are in the larger ‘how’ circle we can add other “how’s” to our spiritual repertoire – meditation, mindfulness, contemplation, social justice awareness, environmental concern, walks on the beach, tramps in the hills, unconventional families, changing gender identity.

We add those hows and whats not because they are cool, or because they will be slick marketing to attract others because they are non-religious activities or because we can’t think of anything spiritual

people might like, but because they answer *our* deepest “why” questions and therefore they will answer others’ deepest “why” as well.

We need to wake up, as Apple and Coke and the Winter Olympics marketers have already done – you don’t capture people’s attention with a product but by answering their “why”. Coke doesn’t offer you sugary fizzy drinks it offers happiness and smiles, Apple doesn’t offer computers it offers the opportunity to be at the cutting edge of technology, the Winter Olympics doesn’t offer only sports, it invites you to join in and “Become the Light”

As long as we just tell people in fliers and on organisational charts that we do studies and have discussions and concerts and lectures and write submissions, they won’t know “why” we do that, and whether the “why” that motivates us to the “how” and the “what”, resonates with their “why”, sitting deep down there inside them.

I wonder if we will ever get to the stage of thanking the people who left the church; who knew something was wrong even though they may not even yet be able to articulate their “why?”; who weren’t prepared to put up with the incongruity, and in their leaving altered us to the problem of our misplaced eggs. They have been the canaries in the mine, alerting us to incongruities and danger.

This week, imagine we as a faith community were signing a treaty with our society and agreeing to work in partnership for our mutual spiritual good.

In making that deal, what priority would we place on discovering the “why” question we have in common with those who don’t come here often? Not escaping into finding a common ‘what’ we do nor even a common ‘how’ we do it. But digging deep to find the “why” which offers so much energy and promise.

How much practice would we then need at being brave enough to tell others our “why” rather than only our “how” and “what?”

I’ve fallen into this trap already this year. The flier I prepared on Wednesday turns out to have nothing at all about “why” we do what we do. I produced two sides of an A4 full of great “what” we do and “how” we do it, but not a “why” to be seen!

I’m sure when we get talking we will rapidly find our “whys” and maybe even a collective “why” we can all agree on. If we can get the wording down to a basic enough level I am sure we will find it is uncannily like the “why?” within the hearts of those who walk past our doors and maybe never into a church.

We heard “why” statements in the two readings: Paul saying “*What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge..*” Jesus saying, even after a “successful” healing event: “*Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.*” And remember Brian McLaren suggests the “why” of the whole universe is so that we can “*breathe, think, dream, speak, and be alive together.*”

To what purpose will we sign up this year? Beaver away at lots of hows and whats, or discerning why we are here and fitting everything to that?

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