

Am I a visible Christian??

(revised July 2007 for presentation at St Augustine's)
(partly based on an article by George Barna in Decision May
2000)

You may have already noticed that the Epistle passage that Renae read for us this morning was used by Jonathan in his sermon last week. This is in a way a co-incidence and in another way not a co-incidence. It is a co-incidence in that I had prepared this talk and selected the passages to accompany it a couple of weeks before Jonathan preached last week and I had no idea what he was going to say or what passages he was going to refer to.

I believe that is not a co-incidence that both Jonathan and I were led to talk on similar themes.

But, you'll be glad to know, I haven't been listening to any Baptist Preaching Conferences and I don't consider myself to be much of a Baptist but I would be quite happy if any of you want to practice being Baptists and respond appropriately. . Also, due to this persistent cough that I have had for several weeks now I won't be giving you my normal stentorian bellow but I'll talk at a much more

moderate level and rely on Bill up there in the Tower of Power to make it audible for you.

There is a song which we will be singing later “When I survey the Wondrous Cross” and it’s a song that has very moving words. The last two lines are “*Love so amazing so divine, demands my life ,my soul, my all.*” It is talking about Jesus amazing love for us and asking for our response, not just asking but demanding our response. Part of what I want to talk about this morning is our response to Christ’s love..

You may recall that Jonathan talked about an “Impassioned Heart” about a heart being alive and on fire for Christ and I am sure that the possessor of a heart alive and on fire for Jesus Christ would be a visible Christian and that’s my theme for this morning – “Am I a Visible Christian”. Or in other words am I a person in whom the world can see a difference because of my relationship with Jesus Christ? Am I a person whose relationship with Jesus Christ is visible for the world to see.

There was a study carried out some years ago in the US by George Barna who is a Christian pollster and it was reported in Billy Graham's magazine Decision. The purpose of the survey was to compare the lives of people who described themselves as born-again-Christians and people who described themselves as non-Christians. 66 core religious practices and beliefs were measured on the two groups, and there were only 9 factors where there was any demonstrable difference between the two groups. When the two groups were studied on 65 non-religious factors such as core values, common moral behaviours and attitudes there was absolutely no difference between the two groups, Christians and non-Christians.

Another study asked non-Christians what makes Christians different from themselves, the answer was that Christians are unique in two ways; they attend church more often and they are more judgmental of other non-Christian people.

This is not the way that Jesus intended us, His followers to be seen, as judgmental of others who do not share our beliefs. Jesus told us to be different, to let our light shine before men, to be seen to be His disciples and now this study shows that many of us are indistinguishable from the

rest of the world and in some ways possibly worse than the rest of the world. That's not right, it's not the way it should be. it's not the way that Jesus wants it to be.

Maybe the problem is that we don't live different lives than non-Christians because we don't think differently than non-Christians. Another possible problem is that we don't understand our faith, we may know the Bible stories and characters and principles but we haven't understood the truths at the heart of those stories and we haven't allowed them to change the way we think and act and make us more Christ-like.

In the final words of the Gospel of Matthew that Iris read for us a few minutes ago Jesus gives us an instruction, a command, an order even, He commissions us in verses 19 and 20 , lets look at it *“Therefore go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* and he doesn't add – if you want to, or when it suits you, or if it's convenient, he says GO and DO.

Are we prepared to GO and DO. It's not optional my friends -we are commanded.

But he doesn't leave us alone because he says " I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth".

When we step out boldly in His name, when we tell others about Him we are not alone. He will be with us, He said so, He promised!

What me, be an evangelist, that's what we send money to Billy Graham for, we don't want to be evangelists. Well, that's denying or at least ignoring Jesus' Great Commission. He instructs all of us, yes all of us, not just Billy Graham and Ralph Bell and the other well-known evangelists, but all of us.

This year in Canada over 300,000 people will die and over 200,000 of them will die without knowing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Doesn't that break your heart?

We are all called to be Jesus disciples, teaching the people of the world the Good News of Jesus life and how He died for the sins of everyone of us, not just the Christians but the non-Christians as well. And how will they know if no one tells them? And who will tell them if we don't do it?

But remember Jesus promise – I will be with you always, even unto the ends of the earth. We can be Visible Christians because we have the assurance that Jesus is with us.

Someone once described evangelism as “one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread”. But unlike bread which when shared may result in less for each person doing the sharing Jesus doesn’t diminish with sharing, He doesn’t get less because we share him with another.

Remember the first part of the James passage that Renae read, let’s look at verse 17 *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows”*. We have been given a great gift, the love of Jesus, which leads to our salvation, and we are to share that gift because it comes from our Heavenly Father

Suppose you discovered a store, which had the most fantastic things for sale, and at really affordable prices,

would you keep that information to yourself and not share it with anyone. Or, knowing someone who needed the goods that were sold in that store wouldn't you tell them about it or better still take them to the store and help them select from its treasure trove? So why should it be any different about Jesus and His love. Why keep the knowledge to yourself? Why not share it with all those around you and those that you meet - those who need it.

But we are shy and reticent about sharing. I'll give you an example in a story. This story comes from a man who is probably one of the least likely people ever to be quoted in a sermon, a man named Bates who was among other things a demolition contractor.

There was a man in England, a landowner who lived in a big house with a large estate and on this land there was a beautiful chapel with glorious stained glass windows. But this chapel was quite a way away from the main house and you couldn't see it from the main house. Well, there was a visitor coming to that estate, a "Very Important, Very High Ranking Visitor" and the host wanted to show off his chapel with its stained glass windows but being English he had to be restrained and refined, he couldn't say to his important

visitor “come and look at my chapel”. No, he had to wait for the visitor to ask about the chapel and how was he going to ask if he didn’t know it was there? My friends sometimes we are just too English, we are too refined, we are too restrained, we don’t want to appear pushy in our dealing with other people but remember what Jesus promised “ Surely, I am with you, even to the ends of the earth.” We can’t always wait for people to ask us about Jesus, we have to be bold and tell them. But remember Jesus says He will be with us!

The big questions is are we living a new life in Jesus such that others can see that there is something different about us? If we are seen to be different, if we are Visible Christians people will ask us why we are different and then we can tell them. Tell them about Jesus.

In the passage from Mark’s gospel we reminded of the 10 commandments especially the ones about love.. Lets look together at the second part of verse 29 through to the end of verse 31. *'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*

31The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus is talking about love, about loving God and about loving our neighbor as ourselves. Once again it's not an option, it's an instruction, it's a command. We are commanded to love our God and love our neighbor.

You may say, well that was then, that was 2000 years ago. I remind you of how Jonathan explained it last week – this passage is taken from one of the Books of the Law, the first five books of the Bible so it's actually more like 4000 years ago. And lets look again at the James passage where it says of our Father of Heavenly Lights – *"Who does not change like shifting sands"* (the last part of verses 17 of chapter 1).

What I'm saying here is that if God said it 4000 years ago and 2000 years ago and God doesn't change then it's still relevant today, it's still a commandment today! We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. And that's one way to be a Visible Christian.

There is a missionary family at First Alliance that tells a story that is appropriate to tell here. Their names are Pixie and Larry Charter and they served the Lord in West Africa. They were working in one of the countries there, way up in the north of the country just below the Sahara Desert. 98% of the people there are Muslims and in those areas it is forbidden to try to convert Muslims to Christianity. So Pixie and Larry had to work undercover, friendship evangelism not preaching evangelism. Pixie had been working with the local Muslim ladies in the town market-place helping them to prepare better meals for their families and in most cases just sitting and chatting with them and sharing their crafts and handiwork. Well, the time came for Pixie and Larry to come back to Canada. There was an old Muslim lady who had never joined in with what Pixie was doing with the other women, she just hung around on the edge of the group. When she found out that Pixie and Larry were leaving she came to Pixie and said "I hear you are leaving us" Pixie replied "Yes, it's time for us to go back to Canada" "Oh" said the lady "we'll miss you!" "Well thank you" said Pixie. "Yes" the old lady said "there's something different about you Christians, we Muslims talk about love, you Christians live it". She could see the difference.

Larry and Pixie were loving their neighbors, they were being Visible Christians and that old lady could see the difference.

Later we'll be singing "And they'll know we are Christians by our love". I think that song applies to Larry and Pixie and their love as shown to the people they were serving in that story.

Let's now turn to the second part of the passage from James, the part from chapter 2. Let's look at verses 14 to 18.

14What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Here James is talking about faith and good works. My friends I believe that our good works flow from our faith.

We believe in Jesus and we believe Jesus and we want to respond to His love. As I said at the beginning of this talk quoting from one of the songs that we will be singing this morning “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all”. Our response flows out of our faith.

My friends some people get it backwards, we are not saved, we do not obtain our salvation by our works as some people believe. No, we are saved by our faith and then because of our faith we are compelled to “Go and do likewise” as Jesus said in last week’s Gospel passage. Our good works are a result of our faith and not the other way round. Because we follow Jesus and we want to become more Christ-like we change our lives, our way of doing things so as to answer the question “What would Jesus do” and “go and do likewise”.

There is another story that comes out of the time that Iris and I spent in Morocco. There was a young girl named Ouidad who lived with her family in the town of El Hocema, which is on the Mediterranean coast. When she was 16 she was kidnapped by an older man and taken to be his second or third or fourth wife. Her family were very upset and frantically tried to find her and after a while they did find

her, she was being held captive and raped in a hotel room so they got her free, but by now she was pregnant. Now normally this would have caused her family to throw her out because even though she was the innocent party she was pregnant and unmarried and that is not condoned in that society. But her father did not follow the custom of his people, because of the circumstances of her pregnancy he went against the custom of his people and allowed her to stay in the family home and have the baby.

Shortly after the baby was born the area around El Hocema was struck by a severe earthquake, the family house was destroyed and two of Ouidad's brothers were killed.

Ouidad's father blamed Ouidad for this tragedy and threw her and the baby out of the family. Through some Christian people who heard about her situation Ouidad came to the Village of Hope, the children's project where Iris and I were working and it was decided by the project people that she and the baby could stay at the project for a short time whilst we tried to find a home for them. She is a good worker and helped out in the kitchen and with other tasks to try to pay for her keep. Several local young men were interested in Ouidad but the baby was a problem to them.

Our general foreman was a man named Mohammed Louhidi who had become a Christian some time before Iris and I arrived at the project. One day Mohammed came to me and said – I'm going to marry that girl and I'm going to adopt the baby and give her my family name so that when Ouidad and I have other children they will all have the same family name!

Now this is absolutely unheard of in Morocco, to take someone else's baby into his family and give her his family name but this is what Mohammed has done and when we left Morocco he was still fighting the legal battles over the adoption. When we get back from our trip to Morocco in September we'll give you an update on this story.

Mohammed let his deeds flow out of his faith. He was following the words of James "I will show you my faith by what I do" (verse 18)

We believe that Mohammed, and Larry and Pixie that I mentioned earlier are living examples of a Visible Christians! And we believe that Mohammed was led to his most unusual

and probably illegal course of action by seeing Visible Christians around him at the Village of Hope, those who worked and lived there and those who came to serve there.

That's what its all about, Jesus said we were to love our neighbours as ourselves. Love our neighbours not gossip about them, not be judgmental about them, not avoid them but love them as ourselves. Jesus loved all of us, He loved us so much that He died on the cross at Calvary so that we might have eternal life with Him in heaven. My friends, am I living my life so that the people I meet during the day at work and in all the places that I go to can see that I am a true follower of Jesus Christ before I tell them that I am a Christian? Are you living your lives so that people can see that you are Christians, do the people here in Calgary know that you are a Christian by the way you relate to them not just because they see you sitting here on a Sunday morning?

Are we all living that new life in Jesus so that others can see that there is something different about us and so that they will want that uniqueness in their lives too?

There is a well-known passage in 1st Corinthians 13, verses 4 to 8 that I'd like to read to you.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but always rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

This passage is the great passage on love but I think it is also a description of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Let's rewrite it slightly.

“Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. He does not envy, He does not boast, He is not proud. He is not rude, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil but always rejoices with the truth. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Jesus never fails.”

That is as beautiful a statement of the person and character of Jesus as any that I can think of.

Now let's rewrite the love passage one more time. But this time let's put I where we had Jesus just now. And I think that the only true measure of how close I am to Christ, how Christ-like I am in my daily life, how different I am to the world about me is in how truthfully I can say these words.

"I am patient, I am kind. I do not envy, I do not boast, I am not proud. I am not rude, I am not self-seeking, I am not easily angered, I keep no record of wrongs. I do not delight in evil but always rejoice with the truth. I always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere. I never fail."

My friends, am I a visible Christian, are you a visible Christian?

One of my favorite sayings is attributed to St Francis of Assisi. – "Preach the Gospel always; if necessary use words"

Remember, we are all evangelists, all the time, we are all preaching a Gospel all the time, even when we don't use words.

But which Gospel are we showing to everyone around us, the gospel of the world or the Gospel of Christ?.

My friends – my final question today is – Are You a **Visible** Christian?.

Footnote.

Information regarding surveys etc in the early part of this talk is taken from an article by George Barna in the May 2000 edition of Decision Magazine published by the Billy Graham Evangelical Association.