

# Honest-to-God Gospel Meets the Dying World

John Strelan

The dying *world*! I have enough to worry about with a dying Australia, let alone a dying world.

Australians have never had much time for the gospel as they heard it from the institutional church. The relationship got off to a bad start with the first European invaders' hatred of the Rev Samuel Marsden, chaplain and magistrate. He was known as 'the flogging parson' (he preached on Sundays and flogged on Mondays). Today the majority of Australians still don't trust the church and its message. Less than 9% of the population attends church regularly.

Divorce from the church and the rejection of organized Christianity doesn't mean, however, an absence of religious interest or spirituality... or 'spiritualities'. Islam as a perceived threat to religious Australia; the resurgence of religion as a moral influence in politics; and attacks on religion by scientists such as Richard Dawkins [*The God Delusion*], have made religion a lively dinner-party topic, with all kinds of Australians admitting to the faith-derived foundations of their personal conduct and life-organisation skills, and coming out as 'believers' of sorts. God-in-Christ is, however, only one of many possible faith objects.

A recent magazine article told the story of Maria. She'd been searching for ways to improve her life. She wanted more money, a better job, a better quality of life. At first she turned to

prayer. *I was reading about Tina Turner, about how she used to pray and that, and because I'm a Catholic I have to believe in God.* But after a couple of years Maria felt she needed something more, so she turned to feng shui [the ancient Chinese practice which aims to encourage positive flow in the environment]. One thousand dollars and two years later, after being assured that wisdom was in her bedroom, fame in her kitchen, money in her laundry, and a career at the front door, Maria found that nothing had changed in her life. These days Maria is back to putting her faith in God, she says. 'As for the rest', the report concluded, 'she's putting that down to a lapse in concentration'. That's about where we are: giving up on God is dismissed with a shrug as 'a lapse in concentration'.

The honest-to-God gospel. Previous speakers have told us clearly what the honest-to-God gospel is and isn't. I won't repeat what they have said. Instead I'll take a step sideways and begin with the rather obvious observation that 'gospel' implies a 'gospeller': *How shall they hear without a preacher?* God addresses the dying world through agents (angels, prophets, apostles, various other human messengers, enemy rulers, terrorists) or means (floods, wars, earthquakes, famines, tsunamis).

Thus when God had something to say to Israel, God sometimes did so through an angel; on at least one occasion God spoke through a donkey (a fact that has been of great comfort to many preachers); but most commonly God spoke through human beings, men and women.

The prophetic literature of the old covenant is replete with the phrase: *The word of the Lord came to...* One example: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it'.* Jonah went off in the very opposite direction. But God threw a storm after him, and after a

series of 'throws', Jonah ended up where he started. Then we get one of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.* A second time! God was patient with this petulant prophet. But Jonah did not repent. Iraq repented, from the king to the cattle, Iraq repented...but not Jonah.

Earthen vessels, aren't we. Weak, recalcitrant Jonahs. There is, however, one Gospeller who was without sin but who became an earthen vessel for the sake of a dying world. The Scriptures say of him: *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by the Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.* The Son. Spitting image of the Father. The Son shows us the heart of God, beating for us... pining for us.

Jesus Christ is both Gospeller and Gospel. As he came from God and was sent by God, so we gossellers have our roots and origin in heaven, and we are sent by the Son to a dying world, living and speaking in the power of Holy Spirit, the Son's promised gift to us.

Inasmuch as this is true of all gossellers, we are all the same. All of us speak of God's great rescue as ones who have themselves been greatly rescued by God. In parts of Eastern Germany there are pulpits known as *Walfischkanzeln*. The preacher enters the pulpit through the body of the fish, and emerges to speak from between the jaws of the fish. That's the place from which all gossellers speak: from between the jaws of the fish.

That we all have in common. But in everything else we are, each of us, different. And here's where we see the great wisdom and the world-embracing love of God. When the life-giving gospel meets the dying world in and through me, it will have a

different shape, a different texture, from the gospel which meets the world through you. Its heart and soul is the Lord Jesus Christ crucified and risen, but its clothing comes in part from our life experiences, the way God has chipped away at us to conform us to the image of the Son. So don't knock your experiences, good or otherwise. And don't insist that others must have your set of experiences in order to be effective gospellers. This individuality is how God makes provision for an ongoing repetition of the Pentecost event: men and women preaching the one message (Christ crucified), but each one speaking a different language so that people may hear, understand, and say: today God's Word struck me as surely as the spear of the hunter finds the heart of the pig.

Notice how the life experiences of God's chosen gospellers shaped the way they spoke the Word. The blinding light of Damascus road gave Paul some of his brightest gospel language. Julian of Norwich (fl. AD 1318) saw the bubonic plague leaving countless children motherless... as she was. She wrote movingly in her *Revelations of Divine Love* of Jesus our Mother: *The human mother will nurse her child with her own milk, but our beloved Mother, Jesus, feeds us with himself, and with the most tender courtesy, does it by means of the blessed Sacrament, the precious food of all true life.* Luther's early experiences of his search for righteousness before God and his subsequent Aha! encounter with Romans 1-3, shaped his reading of how the Word is to be read and confessed before the world.

You can probably give examples of how God intersected the gospel with your lives – each one differently – and how the Holy Spirit equips you, each in your different ways, to intersect the gospel with the lives of those who are dying for life.

More about gospellers later.

## II

A dying world. Where do we start when talking about 'the world'? Basically, we can inquire as to how God sees the world, or how the world sees itself. For the latter its best to go to the ad men and women, the artists, film-makers, playwrights, poets, novelists. They have their finger on the pulse. Or just go to talk-back radio or the Letters to the Editor page: *The country has changed*, wrote one young man. *Forget about good for all; tell me about good for me*. Or here's a young woman, interviewed in a book about the Y generation: *The world is an effed-up place*. Ruth Wajnryb, in her book *Language Most Foul*, claims that the F-word is the most prolific and morphologically flexible swear word in the English language. *The world is an effed-up place*. It figures: the F-word sums up the world as far as the world is concerned. Inelegant... but theologically accurate.

On the other hand, you can probably cite many examples which show that the world actually thinks well of itself. Warren Buffett donates \$42 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He is reported to have said: 'There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way'. Australia's richest man, by the way, 'died' during an operation. Later he reported: 'There's no eternity; no hell; no heaven'. He has since learned that he chose the wrong thing to be wrong about.

The world has its own value system, too. The 10 Commandments are still OK, but they are multiple choice. And consider the 'new morality':

The new morality works like this: if you're not harming anyone, anything you choose to do is fine; and if you are harming someone, that's sad rather than bad...or to put it another way, if your friend leaves his wife and family for another woman, your first responsibility is to take him out

for a beer and talk about his turmoil and how unhappy he has been – rather than remind him of all that stuff he said at the altar. Judging is old morality. Empathising is new morality...To get new morality right, you want to be seen to be caring and open-minded...as long as your self-esteem is intact (and that's basically salary-linked), you count yourself a pretty moral sort of person [Shane Watson].

But after all the narcissism and self-indulgence, when the world looks at itself in the mirror at 2.00am, it doesn't like what it sees and it holds out little hope for itself. Therefore, as one warrior said to another in *The Phantom Menace*, 'Concentrate on the moment. Feel. Don't think!' Or as the Nike ad used to say: 'Just do it!'

And yet, and yet... Picador publishers plans to publish four books which will address the USA five years after 9/11. The first novel in the quartet was published late 2006: *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. The nuclear buttons have been pressed. The world is silent apart from the intermittent tremble of earthquakes and the crash of falling trees. A man and his son – both nameless, both dying – are travelling across the US. The man wants to reach the coast, where he hopes he might find a group of survivors who will care for his son. In this dying world all human values have fallen away. The one inviolate fact is the bond between father and son. *He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father it might well be as his dead wife had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death.* Such an impossibly slender thread upon which to hang future hopes! But that's what McCarthy does. In the midst of all the unspeakable horrors, the terror and destruction, McCarthy sees hope: the world (he means the USA) will find a way through. Such optimism!

Now, in the context of the task of gospeling to the world, it is important that we are aware of how the world sees itself, what it values, fears, loves, worries about, hopes. That knowledge will, together with our own life-experience and personal formation, influence the particular **shape** of our message. But how the world sees itself is not the ultimate; the ultimate is: how does God see the world?

What is the world according to God? For an answer I could give you a cross-section of Scripture testimony, including Paul's discussion of 'the flesh', or 'the present evil age', but I think the best sustained report on 'the world according to God' is in the Book of Revelation. The world is the great city Babylon, the very attractive whore-city which seduces its citizens to commit every kind of abomination and wickedness, to drink from the cup of evil it offers them continually.

The citizens of Babylon, leaders and led alike, are united in their opposition to God and God's people. They worship and serve the Unholy Trinity: the Dragon and the two Beasts, that is, the political, economic and religious power structures in the world. These mimic the persons of the Holy Trinity, even to the point that the second person of the Unholy Trinity has its throat cut (just like the Lamb-who-was-Slain). So this unholy alliance leads astray multitudes; even Christians are in danger of being deceived, of following the counterfeit instead of the reality, of going after false saviours and ways of salvation that lead nowhere. Dead ends, literally.

The world according to the Unholy Trinity looks to be the real thing, the only reality. It believes its own spin. A White House adviser, when discussing the role of facts in problem-solving, is reported to have remarked: 'That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'. But such a reality is a lie, one big

deception. Its like the set for a spaghetti Western: an impressive façade which if you probe a bit proves to be just that: a façade. And its headed for destruction, says the prophet John (Rev 17:8,11) .

So put on God's glasses and see things as they really are. The ad people, the novelist, the artist, the playwright, the poet, all those people have their finger on the pulse – but their reading of the world is only a penultimate one. The reading that matters, the one that alone is honest-to-God, is God's view of the world. So I repeat: if we are going to be of any earthly use, the first thing we must do is see the world through God's glasses. A theological reading of the world, if you like. The world according to God.

When we do that on the basis of what God has revealed to us in and thru God's word, we will 'call the thing what it actually is', as Luther insisted theologians of the cross do. We will speak to the world of sin, not just as a moral category but as an ontological one. We will speak of what has happened and what happens to a world in which sin is a fact of life. We'll expose the festering sickness under the 'healthy' exterior. Show the world how it stands *coram Deo*, in the eyes of God. We'll pull no punches.

We will also speak of and to the world of the wages of sin: dying and death and divine judgment. Hmm. In a post-post modern world, passing judgment on anyone is out, and God, if God exists at all, is terminally ill. Death? Avoid the word. Circumlocute. Cosmeticise. Talk about 'passing on' or something. Naming death gives it a reality the world doesn't want to face. Crime-writer Ed McBain spoke for the world when he observed that 'death is not noted for its compassion.'

But being honest-to-God in our speaking to a dying world, we



call the thing what it really is. There's no human resource which can rescue a dying world from its inevitable death and destruction, from the judgment of God. No human resource: nothing within the dying world can save it. That's offensive. That just drives the dying world into further anger and rebellion against God. Sin becomes more sinful and the judgment more inevitable, as it were.

And so we come to the bottom line, the primal and seminal sin: the world's refusal to trust God and God's rescue plan for the world. Unfaith. Unbelief. Curved in on itself and away from God, the dying world has exchanged the truth of God for a lie, the true God for gods of its own making. As a result, the world is without God and without hope. Hope-less.

### **III**

We honest-to-God gospellers have something to say to this hopeless, dying world, don't we? Before I expand on that, I have to tell you that I am uncomfortable talking all the time about 'the world'. In the context of gospeling, what do we mean, specifically, when we say 'the world'? The great unwashed of China... India... Indonesia? The Islamic world? The new rich in Russia? The poor and oppressed ethnic groups in Australia and the Americas and Europe? The world of your apartment block, your school or office or local neighbourhood? If we are going to be honest-to-God about gospeling a dying 'world', we have to clarify which 'world' we are called to address.

Consider this: in the Book of Acts, Jesus commissions the apostles to be 'my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth'. The 'world'. And then Luke recounts key gospeling incidents, illustrating the fulfilment of the commission: Philip and Simon in Samaria; Philip and the eunuch from Ethiopia; Ananias and Saul from Tarsus; Peter and

Cornelius of the Italian Cohort; Paul and the jailor at Philippi; Priscilla and Apollos – in short, not the masses, but individuals. But, you ask, what about Pentecost? Well, a careful reading of that account suggests that Peter's 'sermon' should be taken as illustrative of what all the apostles said that day: Peter 'stood up together with the eleven'. So perhaps those 3000 who were baptised that day had been addressed by God's law-and-gospel word in their first or second language, one they understood. It was not a general word, but a personal, particular word that brought life to those dying hearers.

Consider, furthermore, the nature of the honest-to-God gospel itself. In his grand theological testament, written when he believed he was facing imminent death, Martin Luther speaks of the gospel, 'which gives more than one kind of counsel and help against sin, because God is overwhelmingly rich in his grace'. First is the spoken word, specifically the word concerning forgiveness of sins; 2nd, Baptism; 3rd the Sacrament of the Altar; 4th Absolution; and 5th 'the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters'. Notice that after the spoken word, which is general and 'preached to the whole world' as Luther says, everything else is particular and personal: baptism, Lord's Supper, absolution, mutual consolation. Absolution, by the way, used to be personal and particular, in my church at least (we had communal confession of sins, then we came to the altar: *Come then to the altar, and kneeling receive the holy Absolution*. My first pastor was my father. Still today, when I hear the absolution pronounced, I can feel my father's hand on my head). Thus, in various ways, God makes provision to ensure that we don't gospel everyone in general and no-one in particular.

In the next few minutes, when I say 'world' let's not exclude the global dimension, but let's think especially of individual people or small groups in our micro-cosmos who are dying for

lack of the Light and the Bread and the Water of Life. God has placed them in our path. How do we gospel them?

But quickly, first, an easier question: *what* do we speak to them? We can't go wrong if we do what St Mark tells us our Lord did: he heralded the 'gospel of God', saying that now is God's special, saving time; the kingdom of God is here (in his person); people should repent and believe in the gospel. The good news is that God is savingly at work in the world in the person of God's Son. The proper response is to repent and believe.

So far so good. An answer straight out of the seminary textbook. Still the question nags: *How* do we 'herald the gospel of God', speak God's word for people to people?

Well, before we speak to them we listen to them: befriend them, draw near to them (as Jesus did with 'publicans and sinners'), practise hospitality (not the hospitality-industry model where people go in strangers and leave strangers), but actually get our hands wet as we dry their tears, and *listen* to them.

Honest-to-God gospel-listening is called for: listening with sensitivity, love, compassion, hearing their cries, eager to know them and learn their language. Sacrificial listening, if you like, where we put ourselves and our agendas second to the person God has placed before us. You won't know in what language to couch the word of life if you don't know the language of the person who is dying. The spear will miss the mark. There's a line in the movie *As Good as it Gets* which haunts me as a gopeller: Jack Nicholson's character is obsessive/compulsive. He's frustrated because people don't listen for the compassionate heart beating inside the socially inept, even horrid, exterior.

At a critical point he cries out: 'I'm drowning here, and you're

describing the water'. I fear, fear greatly that all too often I'm guilty of describing the water. That happens when I don't listen. 'Describing the water...'

Listening to reach the heart. One of the saddest stories I heard in Papua New Guinea was of a young missionary who tried to elicit language data from the people in an academic and impersonal way. He interrogated his informants, wrote it all down, retired to his hut at night to write-up his findings. ..but showed little interest in developing a personal relationship with the people. He heard but did not listen. The people did not like him, so they invented a language for him, and taught it to him bit by bit! Why did you do that? *We didn't want him to get into our hearts*, they said. I guess it was some sort of blessing that he contracted a tropical disease and had to return to his home country before he found out what the people were doing.

Listen so that you may speak to the heart. What language? How do we tell of the urgent presence of the Kingdom of God in the present, in people's lives, tell it in such a way that they will repent and believe the gospel? It is perhaps worth noting – in trying to answer those questions – that after the programmatic sentence in Mark 1:14,15 (to which I alluded above), there is no account in the rest of Mark's gospel of Jesus using repent- and-believe language.

Does that mean that throughout his earthly ministry Jesus did not in fact preach 'the good news of the Kingdom' and call people 'to repent and believe'? No. He did, but not as we might expect him to do it. Mark tells a number of stories about Jesus healing 'many that were sick of divers diseases'[KJV] (as a child that phrase puzzled me: did divers have particular diseases?), including lepers, the blind, the crippled and a woman with a 12- year haemorrhage. Mark tells of Jesus enjoying

table fellowship with 'tax collectors and sinners'.

Common to these stories is the theme of clean/unclean – something which would have been on the minds of Mark's presumably gentile readers. Unclean people – lepers, sick, a menstruating woman, the blind, the lame, and Gentiles, were regarded as being 'outside'. They were excluded from temple and synagogue. They needed to meet Jesus, the Kingdom bringer, who crosses the boundaries and brings the outsiders in, makes them insiders. 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners', Jesus said in explanation of his action in eating and drinking with outsiders (Mark 2:17).

All of Jesus' boundary-crossing activities were announcements of the good news of the Kingdom, announcing that the Kingdom of God is here, now. Those who accepted the Lord's gracious invitation to a meal, who came to him for healing, who saw in him the place of God's presence, who were cleansed by him, who were restored to life – these received the good news of the Kingdom. In classical terms, they repented and believed: they changed, or better, they were changed; they came in from the cold into the warmth of fellowship with Christ. They became new people: outsiders became insiders; sick became healthy; unclean became clean.

We might also note how Mark presents Jesus as Lord of the powers which seek to dominate human existence: Beelzebub and the demonic powers, the sea 'gone wrong', sin, the law, the 'leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod', the traditions of the elders, unjust civil and ecclesial authorities, and death itself. These have all had their teeth removed. This was Mark's good news to his readers, just as it is good news to your friends and neighbours and colleagues who are enslaved or exploited by the anti-God powers of 2007.

Could or should we speak the 'gospel of the Kingdom' using the kind of language and Jesus stories that Mark did? Just because Mark did it does not mean we have to. But it makes a lot of sense to me today. Take, for example the idea of clean/unclean or inside/outside. The people who do TV ads in Australia play on the fact that people want to be clean (clean kitchen floor, clean bathroom, clean hair, clean body, clean clothes and so forth). They touch a neuralgic point. They know that there's a chronic sense of uncleanness among many Australians. The various kinds of abuse and hurts, the pain and wounds which men, women and children endure, paedophilia, including corporate paedophilia, rape, home invasion, broken families, and, and ...the list is long – people feel violated, dirty, deserted, insecure, rejected and neglected by God and humans: 'unclean' and 'outside', marginalised. Such people need to hear the story of the Clean One who became the Unclean One for them and took all their rubbish with him to the cross. They need to be introduced to the Ultimate Insider who went outside, and crossed all the boundaries to stand beside the Outsiders and bring them home. A message like that would be for such people 'the good news of the Kingdom'.

The point I'm trying to make is that we are not locked into just one way of gospelling – we are free to find the particular way which 'fits' the person or persons or situation we are addressing. Mark's gospel shows us that we don't have to use the word 'gospel' or 'Kingdom of God' or 'believe' or 'repent' to speak the good news to someone. The language and imagery and metaphors you use should be determined by the situation of the person with whom you are interfacing. Usually the 'language of Zion' is to them a foreign language.

Many years ago, in Papua New Guinea, my fellow-missionaries and I faced the challenge of speaking the gospel to a people who had no written language. They were deeply religious, which made our

task harder, since they heard all that we said through their own complex religious matrix (which we didn't grasp quickly or well). We made many mistakes, and we were often misunderstood. But it was a necessary exercise, and good for us. We couldn't bluff our way through. We had to unpack our Christian faith, identify what was the essence and what was the cultural baggage, consider the religious language we used to express it, and repackage it all in such a way that it would be God's living Word addressed to people in their own language. We prayed that when the people heard it, they would say: Today God spoke to me in my own language in my own place in my own time.

Every gospeller has had to go, and must still go, through that same process. One of the great things about Crossings is that practitioners get to learn and practice just how to do the transition from biblical/theological/dogmatic language and imagery to the language of today's situations. It's a great preparation for mission.

The gospel is actually simple and straightforward, even though it deals with the deepest mysteries. The complexity lies in the human situation today. There's no way that 'one size fits all' when it comes to speaking the gospel into each person's unique situation and sets of experiences. It requires wisdom and compassion, thoughtful effort and patience on our part...and, don't forget, listening!

Can we do it? No. But God can and does... through the word we speak, halting and ill-fitting though it may be. For the word we speak is what St Peter calls an 'imperishable seed'; it's the 'living and abiding word'. Its 'the gospel which was preached to us', says Peter. This seed was implanted in us at our baptism; each day it comes to life in us and gives us new life. God gives us that new life for the sake of the neighbour, so that we may serve the neighbour by being God's instruments for implanting in

them the imperishable seed of the gospel.

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