

What Do You Think of the Neighbours?

Mark 9:38-50

Did your parents ever say to you: "What will the neighbours think?" I remember the phrase being used when I was stepping out of line, perhaps making too much noise or drawing unwanted attention to myself.

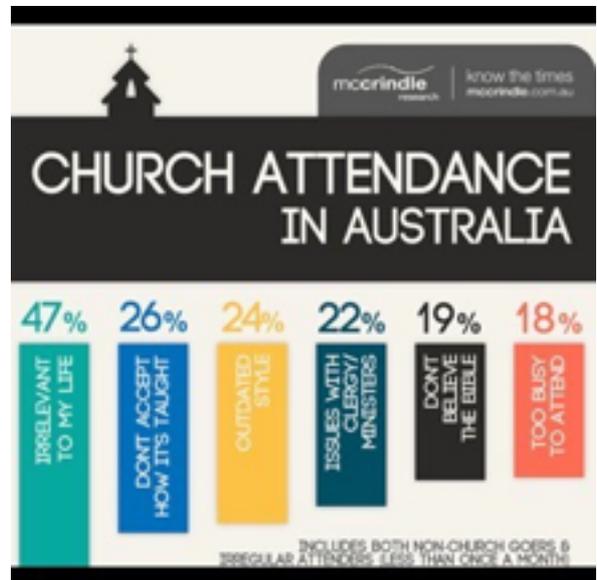


"What will the neighbours think?" This is a good question for St Paul's to ask. What do our neighbours think of us? We can answer that question in the widest possible way by looking at some data from McCrindle Research in which over 1300 Australians were surveyed about what they thought about the church.



88% of people said that the church is beneficial for their community, even though only 1 in 7 Australians attend church. Our neighbours like the fact that the church is there, and that it helps people in need, but they feel no need to engage with it. Only 43% of people said church was beneficial for them personally. When asked why they didn't go to church, people responded:

- 47% of people said it was irrelevant
- 26% said they don't accept what it teaches
- 24% said its style was outdated.
- 22% of people had issues with clergy.
- 19% of people don't believe in the Bible
- 18% of people too busy to attend



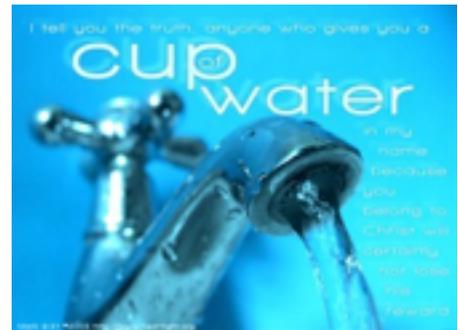
Sixty years ago there was a large overlap between the Christian worldview and the values that Australian society considered important. But society has changed, and our neighbours no longer share many of the moral foundations on which the Christian faith is based: a purposeful creation made by God, human beings created in God's image, a sexual ethic which sees marriage as the right space where a sexual relationship is expressed, and indeed, marriage itself as the lifelong union of a man and a woman. I'm sure you can think of other points of divergence. Our neighbours have moved on, and we have been left behind.

But there are other reason why the neighbours stay away. In today's gospel reading, Jesus speaks about those things which cause "these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble." The

and guarded with those who were outside Jesus inner circle. Was their attitude one of “exclusivity, authority and hypocrisy?”

Jesus’ certainly wasn’t like that. See the trouble he got into from those who were, the Pharisees, who were more interested in ring-fencing God’s reputation and protecting themselves. They criticised Jesus for mixing with the tax collectors, the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, those suffering spiritual oppression. What would the neighbours think? But what was more important was what God thought of the neighbours. He wanted them to know that they weren’t rejected by God; rather, he loved them, cared for them, wanted them to return to him, wanted to lavish his fatherly love on them.

See also how Jesus was opening to receiving his neighbour’s hospitality, choosing to engage with those who didn’t know him or understand his message. He was happy to receive “a cup of water” from them, and their reward was to encounter the living God. An instance of this grace given to the church by others happened when St Paul’s farewelled our dearly loved sister in Christ, June Schultz. As the hearse prepared to turn left out of Elland Ave on to Station Street, the building workers stopped the traffic and took off their hard hats, as a sign of respect. What a gracious gesture! Thank God for it.



This is a lesson that each one of us needs to learn in an environment when we feel that we are coming under attack as Christians. We certainly face a hard-line secular agenda which wants to remove all faiths from the public square, but particularly Christianity, because it has been the majority faith and has for many years had considerable influence in shaping our culture. It’s easy to become cynical, disheartened and bitter about this. But Jesus doesn’t allow us this option.



Instead, he calls to turn whatever antagonism or apathy we receive from other people an opportunity for us to do good. We know well Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount. “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt was a precious commodity in the ancient world. It was used to flavour food, and in that context, it was shared as a sign of hospitality. So to be salt was to be hospitable, generous, committed to the well-being of friend and stranger.

Salt was also a preserving agent. It kept food fresh, pure before the age of refrigeration. Jesus uses this meaning when he says to his disciples today: “Everyone will be salted with fire.” He is warning his disciples of the hard times ahead of them as they confess Jesus as Lord in a world in which the title “Lord” was reserved for Caesar alone. I think we are beginning to understand the cost of making this same confession today, where living and speaking as a faithful Christian might see us labelled as troublemakers. We are learning that sometimes we have to say no when others are saying yes, and the other way round too.

What will the neighbours think of us? That’s a really good question. And a critical one for St Paul’s as we ponder our place and our role in this. But the most important question we need to answer is, “**What do we think of the neighbours?**” Jesus calls us to live like him, to approach our neighbours with a generous heart and a light spirit. And Paul encourages us to “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. **6** Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:5,6)

I came across an article entitled *Pursuing Jesus*. In it the author tackled the question of how we deal with a growing animosity toward the Christian faith. His answer is simple but profound:

“What we and our society now need most is Christian discipleship — men and women who loved Jesus and seek to conform their lives to him ... in ordinary ways ... not in big campaigns but in small daily choices made by people insignificant in the eyes of the world ... in hope, mercy and communities of friendship.”

In particular, he lifts up mercy:

“When Christianity occupied a more dominant place in our culture, we were allowed to overlook mercy many times. Losing that dominance gives us many occasions in which to show mercy.”

What do you think of the neighbours? This week, reflect on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember the question: “Who was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” “The one who had mercy on him,” was the answer.

“Go and do likewise,” Jesus said. Amen.

