

## **'Faith is a crutch' – the lie of self-sufficiency**

Sermon: St Albans Palmerston North, 15 March 2009, Silvia Purdie

*Big Ideas:* We can't do this Life thing under our own strength.  
'Can we do it?' No, we can't.

### **Children's Talk**

Movie: *Kung Fu Panda*

Show the clip where Po receives the scroll.

Ask: What was in the Dragon Scroll? ... answer: a mirror

What do we see in a mirror? (Get a large one to show) ... ourselves

I wonder what who you want to be.

Po wanted desperately to be Kung Fu fighter ... do any of you want to be good at Kung fu too?

So, here's my really hard question. Are you ready?

#### **How do we become who we really want to be?**

In this movie, Po figured out that what he had to do was to believe in himself. And it seemed to work out OK for him. But, you know, it makes me wonder. Is this true, that all we have to do in life is believe in ourselves?

I really don't know if that is true. I have tried it, I really have. I have done my best to believe in myself, and tell myself that I'm OK and I can do really well in life by being myself. And do you know what happened? I just got really tired, and I felt like a failure.

So here's what I think. I think that it is not true that all you have to do is be yourself. Cause, most of the time we don't even really know who we are or what we think anyway. What I have discovered to be true is that actually it's only God who knows who we really are, because God made us. And the only way to be truly happy is to follow Jesus and let God be the boss of your life.

We Christians have our own wonderful scroll, and it's called the Bible, and it doesn't just show us ourselves, it shows us God, and nothing is better than that!

## SERMON

My brother-in-law is a great guy. He's a real hands-on fun Dad to their lovely small girls, he's actively involved in community and environmental projects, he's really committed to his family, good at his work. We get on fine, but he, and my sister, really struggle to get why I am a Christian, and I really struggle to tell them. I can't remember how we got onto this, but he asked me over dinner sometime last year, somewhat incredulously, "Do you really believe that people are basically sinful and that we all need God?"

I gulped. It was out of the blue. I squirmed in my seat. I would much rather have been able to say, 'well, no, of course not. How silly.' But he'd backed me into a corner, and all I could say was a rather pathetic, 'Yes'. I couldn't really deny it. Which was followed by an uncomfortable silence, followed by my sister firmly changing the subject. And I was left feeling thoroughly oldfashioned and narrowminded, and completely hopeless as an evangelist!

Oh dear. The good news is that I have recently attended the most excellent 'XEE' course and next time my brother in law raises a theological question I will be able to clearly and passionately put the gospel of Jesus Christ into a convincing punching few sentences which will lead my family to deeply question their secular assumptions and come seeking God. Or, probably not actually. I live in hope.

What would you say if someone asked you whether you thought people were basically sinful and needed God? I mean, that's not a very popular idea these days. How might you describe why you think that, if indeed you do?

Are people really, fundamentally, screwed up, and in need of salvation from some God out there somewhere? Surely not. You don't really think that, do you? Certainly after watching KungFu Panda, you'd have to at least question the sanity of that outdated idea.

Po, the Kung Fu Panda, was actually brought up to be a noodle seller. His father – who for some inexplicable reason is a duck! – has a famous signature dish, Secret Ingredient Soup. With great fanfare he decides that Po has come of age, and that it is time to tell him the recipe for Secret Ingredient Soup.

... clip

The secret is – there is no secret ingredient

And in the climax of the movie Po puts together the mirrored scroll with this revelation and claims his own identity and power.

... fight clip

So what are we to make of this? What is this telling us? our kids? What is this saying about the meaning of life? What do you think about it?

*ask for suggestions*

The message is, all you need in life is what you see in the mirror. It is you. It is to be yourself.

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

I don't know about you, but I never quite know who I'm going to find in the mirror. Sometimes looking back at me is a moderately attractive young-ish woman, smartly dressed, looking snappy, competent, energetic.

Other times there's this oldish person with wrinkly bits and saggy bits and tired eyes who wants one thing only in life – and that is to crawl into bed and sleep. She's been there quite a lot lately. This solo parenting thing is harder than I expected. Some times this woman in the mirror is hard, grumpy, haggard. Some times I hardly recognize her.

Who do you see in the mirror?

When our culture tells you to 'just be yourself' ... I always wonder 'which self should I be trying to be?' And what am I supposed to do with the other selves that seem to exist within this body of mine? Tell them to move out?

The really hard question, in our society these days, is 'How much do you trust the person in the mirror?' Just how competent do you think you are? Do you really have all the answers to life hidden inside somewhere, just waiting to be found? Can you really do anything, achieve whatever you set yourself to, if only you try hard enough?

Paul struggled with just these kinds of questions 2000 years ago. He writes about them several times in his letters. In the first letter to the Corinthians he writes about how our knowledge now is so partial, so bitsy, so limited, that it is like looking in a grubby, rusty mirror, seeing only dimly, only knowing part of who we are and who God is.

Most challenging of all is Paul in full flight in his letter to the church in Rome. If you have a Bible you can turn with me to Romans chapters 7. Let's start with verse 15. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And verse 18 "nothing good dwells within me".

Man, that is such a contrast, such a contradiction, to the message of KungFu Panda. It is such a hard message, that our instincts rebel against it. All our training in this society tells us that we can do what is good and right under our own steam. 300 years of humanism tell us that human beings are basically GOOD, underneath it all. And human knowledge is good, science is good, progress, education, economics, Capital Growth, industry, technology ... it is all GOOD and it will make life better.

Right. Now look where that got us! We are plunging into global financial recession. We are capable of blowing up the entire planet, and even if we manage to avoid that, we're in serious danger of killing off a mindboggling number of animal species, cooking the planet so that little will be left except weeds, pests and deserts.

This, people, is exactly what Paul was talking about. Even when we try to do what is right, we via off into self-destruction. Even when we think we are being good people, sticking to the rules, leading good enough lives, we are basically, fundamentally, in the grip of death.

Who wants to hear this message? This is not Good News, not on the face of it, not what people want to hear. So good luck with your evangelism, folks. You'll need it, because no one wants to hear this stuff.

You see, I think we are called to be deeply skeptical about the claims and promises of our society. It fascinates me that the early Christians were often accused with the charge of blasphemy and heresy. They were considered to be atheists, because they did not believe in all the gods of the Roman world. They did not worship at the temples of state power or sexual beauty or economic reward. They were unbelievers, skeptics.

Spreading the good news of Jesus Christ in our own society forces us into a head-on collision with the self-confidence of our world.

To acknowledge our **own** need for God is OK. We'll be tolerated, perhaps pitied because we're obviously a little pathetic. But to claim that everyone needs God is offensive, because this slams into what everyone wants to believe, that we are OK, that we can do it. Like, Bob the Builder – Can we fix it? YES WE CAN!

OK, OK, OK. Let's just slow down a minute, here. I'm getting carried away. I mean, that's all very well. But how? It's all very well to talk about confronting the convictions of our society, but that doesn't sound very helpful in our personal relationships with workmates and friends and brothers-in-laws.

The good news is that I have something for you. A tool for your toolkit. (Oops, there's Bob the Builder again!) But first, let me ask you -

What is your instinctive reaction when someone says something you don't agree with in a conversation? Maybe even something you find offensive.

Are you someone who wants to leap right in and defend the truth. Let's argue it out. Bring it on! I'm right, you're wrong!

Or, do you feel like running away? hiding, changing the subject, politely leaving the room (that's me, I can be a complete chicken sometimes)

What do you feel or think or attempt to do when you hit a point of conflict with someone about something that matters to you?

I want to suggest that you stop, before you leap to either fight or flight or fumble to put your own ideas into words. Stop and use this. A nice, simple question that will rescue you in any number of sticky situations and which you can use to gently challenge the assumptions of other people. Are you ready? It's just 6 words.

Andrew's going to put it on the screen for us. Here we go

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

There it is. An essential ingredient in your conversational evangelism. As easy as that, but devastatingly effective. That it really is is a mirror. It holds up a mirror to the other person to get them to look more carefully at what they are saying and what they think.

You see, the biggest problem in conversations we have every day is that what you said is not necessarily the same as what I heard you say. What you mean by those words is not always what I mean, or what I hear. And clichés are the worst. ‘Faith is a crutch’ is a cliché. It’s something people say without really knowing what they are saying when they say it.

So ask them what they mean. Here are some other ways of asking this question

*“That’s really interesting. Tell me more about that.”*

And here’s a really good one, for when someone says something terrible, offensive, that you violently disagree with --- Take a deep breath. Pause. And say *“Wow, that’s a really strong statement. To be honest I find it a bit shocking, but I am also curious about what you really think about that.”* Pause again. Wait for them to respond.

To go back to my disastrous conversation with my brother-in-law over dinner, think how much more interesting it would have been if, instead of my nervous ‘Yes’ I had answered, “Yes, actually I do, but I’m interested in what you mean by that.” It would have given me time to think, and pushed him to reveal what he thinks Christians believe.

I want you to have a wee practice run now. Please turn to the person next to you and say something which they might possibly disagree with, anything at all, something quite ridiculous even. And they need to try NOT reacting to it, but instead simply asking you what you mean. Then swap over. Go on.

...

How was that? Is that something you do naturally or will have to work on?

George Barna is one of the world’s leading researchers and teachers on evangelism. He advocates conversational evangelism as being most helpful with people today, along the lines of the XEE. He writes “the people who are the most effective at sharing their faith are those who are the most lifelike, that is, the people who do not fall back on formulas, stock answers and tired phrases, but who are genuinely engaged in a creative conversation with the seeker.”

“Initiating the conversation is generally most effective when a grand statement is made by the non-believer, not as a challenge, but as a statement of fact. The Christian may then politely and nonthreateningly – almost out of amazement – ask about the assumption on which the statement is built.” (*Evangelism that works*, 119)

“What do you mean by that?”

OK, so where have we got to? I started with KungFu Panda and his mirror, and this claim that there is no secret ingredient, no divine plan or solution, just the mirror. All we need in life we have to find within ourselves. And I talked about two basic problems I have with that personally, my all-too-real awareness of my limitations and inconsistencies, and the evidence that is all-too-obvious around us that human progress is not all it is cracked up to be.

The basic Christian claim that we human beings need God is a scandalous one in the Western world today. To non-Christians, faith seems like a sign of weakness. Only weak people need rescuing. Only failures need help. Faith is a crutch, a temporary assistance that you'll grow out of when you get your act together and can stand on your own two feet. This is just a phase you're going through, a season of emotional immaturity. You'll get over it!

*How do you react to this? How you feel about this accusation, that Christian faith is for people who lack the maturity and strength to stand on their own two feet. Does it offend you? Is there any element of truth to it? What might you say in response?*

Jesus said that he had come to seek and save the lost. In his time everyone knew, or thought they knew, who were saved and who were lost. The lines were publically and clearly drawn, and Jesus burst through all those assumptions. Who are the lost in our society? This is a tough question for us today, I think, because people don't feel lost! After all, who could possibly be lost when we have maps and financial planners and GPS systems and life coaches? After all, men don't ask for directions, do they ladies!

And Jesus says that he came to seek and save the lost. That's you. And me. And my brother in law. Jesus holds a mirror to our lives. Jesus sees us clearly, he sees how far we have wandered from home. God knows the deep restlessness that will not let us rest, the hunger that devour us.

It's not our job to convince non-Christians that they are lost, or sick, or sinful. They will know that already, at some deep level. Sometimes, in moments of crisis, we are all too aware of it, but mostly we do our darndest to hide it, bury our need, cover up the ugly parts of ourselves with makeup or a makeover.

I believe that the more honest we can be with ourselves about our own brokenness, and the more real and open we can be with others, the more genuine and effective will be our words about Jesus Christ who has saved us and healed us.

God has been drawing me deeper into a place where I know I cannot function without his strength. There have been many moments in this past week when I have thought 'I can't do this'. I knew for a fact that I couldn't write this sermon, or preach it. But here I am, and praise the Lord for his mercies day by day.

In our own strength we fall, we cannot do what is right. God strips away the illusion of that we can do it on our own. The Holy Spirit is a mirror to our lives that refuses to let the masks of pride come between us and our creator. If the world sees this as weakness and foolishness, so be it. Let's be fools for Christ. We know that this is the way of life and peace. We know that healing and hope are found here, through the cross of Jesus Christ.

### **Let us pray**

Lord Jesus, you came to seek and save the lost. We confess again this morning that we are indeed lost without you. Find us, Lord, even when we hide from you. Bring us home to the Father.

Lord, every day we try to live in our own strength, in a world which sees no need for you. Each day this week, Lord, show us again our need for you. Bring us gently into complete reliance on you, in every situation, every encounter, every task. Spirit flow through us.

We pray especially for those conversations we will have this week with people who do not live in you. Give us ears to hear, questions to ask, and words to speak that will challenge their assumptions and spark their interest.

Blessed be your name, Jesus Christ, our saviour and strength, our friend and our freedom.

Amen.

Radio ad: “My friends an I have a favourite saying – If shopping doesn’t bring you happiness, you’re in the wrong shop”