

Life changing conversations

According to a psychotherapist, there are 7 things to remember before you can have a life changing conversation with anybody:

1. Don't assume you know the other person's story
2. Don't put your conversational partner into a category
3. Stop trying to fill the space
4. Don't pretend or assume you understand what the other person is saying
5. Get rid of distractions
6. Ask yourself: Am I advancing the conversation?
7. Ask questions but let your conversational partner 'shine'

A life changing conversation is when your entire outlook changes in an instant. But conversation implies Christians can learn a lot by interacting with - and listening to - the world, and especially non-Christians.

You may have had a number of life changing conversations. For me, one was to do with my career. The 1980's recession, high unemployment, led to me going to college. While I was there a lecturer suggested I should go on to university to do a degree. I had never even thought about doing that. It was very fortunate there were no university fees to contend with at the time, which has resonance with today's debates about charging students. I could never have considered doing a degree if I had had to pay fees, in part because I was married and had a young family. We should think carefully about the effect university fees have on people's lives as well as their future contribution to society.

We also have to watch out for bad advice; a friend was dissuaded from a sea-going career, also during the recession hit 1980s. The nautical college he enquired at advised that there was no future in shipping and therefore little point in doing nautical training. However there followed a vast rise in global trade, with China as economic powerhouse, the building of thousands of new ships to carry that trade, and in due course a shortage of trained seafarers. So my friend's seagoing career was unfortunately thwarted by poor advice.

Have you had a life changing conversation? Think carefully about who may have influenced your life and how. In your personal life and in your spiritual journey. This relates very much to the questions people raise, and the effect it has on our own thought process.

"Spend time every day listening to what your muse is trying to tell you" (Saint Bartholomew, 1st century AD) 'Muse' is contemplation or meditation. Catching the muse" is just another way of saying "letting the spirit work through you." This can also help in

your conversations with others.

Throughout the Gospels, we discover how Jesus' questions caused people to really stop and think

Jesus was a great teacher. He amazed crowds with the stories he told and the depth of his wisdom. But what made his teaching style so unique and powerful was his mastery of the art of asking questions.

His questions were simple, clear, never condescending, yet always provocative. They made people think for themselves and examine their hearts. Jesus' questions were always fresh and attuned to the unique needs of the people he was talking to. Instead of following a rote or standardised method, he seemed to have thought about how his questions would affect his audience.

We can see some examples here:

- Who do people say I am? But what about you? Who do you say I am? (Mark 8:27,29)
- Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? (Luke 10:36)
- What good will it be to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? (Matthew 16:26)
- Why are you thinking these things? (Mark 2:8)
- What do you think? (Matthew 17:25,18:12, 21:28 and 22:42)
- Which of the two did what his father wanted? (Mathew 21:31)
- What is written in the Law? How do you read it? (Luke 10:26)

As a researcher, I can see the importance of this from a scientific perspective, where it is always important to know in advance what the (research) questions are.

Can we also provide life changing moments through our conversations with others?

Just as questions were a significant teaching tool for Jesus, questions are also an excellent tool in the hands of his followers – us! Questions are terrific conversation starters. And the really insightful ones force people to think, to look within themselves, to examine their hearts, and search for answers. By simply raising a few interesting questions with our friends, we can also prompt in-depth spiritual conversations naturally.

Here are some example questions we can use:

- What is your religious background (if any)?
- How have your beliefs changed over the years?

- Where would you say you are now in your spiritual journey?
- What are your hang-ups about Christianity?
- In times of trial, in whom or what do you put your faith?

These, and all sorts of similar type questions can become the nudge needed to open up and disclose spiritual roadblocks and eventually take steps to overcome them. Just think what could happen if we would slow down the verbal exchange by asking good questions, and then listen intently to hear what the other person is thinking and feeling, and, in the spirit of conversation talk about the Gospel.

Here are some more questions we can use:

- What do we mean when we pray ‘Your kingdom come’?
- Will the Alternative Vote system (proposed for the UK) deliver a fairer result? What does ‘fair’ mean?
- Does there ever need to be a trade-off between fairness and effective government?
- Where do you exercise leadership in your everyday life (family, paid or voluntary work, the community, clubs or societies)?
- What can you learn from Jesus’ teaching and example?

Jesus’ example of using questions to fuel spiritual conversations succeeded not only with individuals, but also with groups. Asking lots of stimulating questions is the key to facilitate exciting discussions and interactions within a small group setting.

When people verbally respond to thought-provoking questions, they are, in effect, processing their thoughts out loud which enhances learning, comprehension and retention. People in our lives begin to understand spiritual matters when they articulate their findings in their own words. So, great questions not only create opportunities for learning, but they also help people to remember what it is they are discovering.

People remember what they say far better than what they hear us say. And they retain what they discover for themselves better than what they get force-fed from us. By asking questions, we give them the chance to do just that. Our questions should help spark this discovery process and encourage others to articulate out loud the spiritual truths they are beginning to grasp.

As we develop the skill of asking carefully thought-out questions and then allowing others the freedom to grapple with the answers, we may put ourselves in the position to witness first-hand some amazing moments.

As in Isaiah 50, the sovereign Lord gives us his words of wisdom, so that we will know what

to say to those who are 'world' weary.

So let's focus on asking provocative questions, and look out for these moments to happen over and over again in our on-going dialogues with those who are still seeking the truth.

Let's now take a brief Palm Sunday perspective (from Matthew 21(1-11) on regime change.

Conquerors returned on warhorses whereas Jesus 'triumphal entry' was on a donkey. What can we learn from this?

This week's news – and for months now, has been on the numerous 'Arab' uprisings. Autocracy is the historic form of constitution in the Arab world. But an increasingly global-savvy, travelled, IT conscious and educated population has now had enough of dictators with their bulging Swiss bank accounts, their sumptuous mansions located in many of the world's most expensive cities, their mega-yachts and high living – all of which are dependent on resources stolen from their own nations and peoples, most of whom are left impoverished.

In Ivory Coast, the situation came to a head this week: in Libya the struggle against a tyrannical leader continues. On 5 May, we will elect our own Parliament representatives and everyone can participate in the referendum on the voting system by which MPs are elected.

What makes a good political system?

The Genesis story ended in Egypt, where Moses emerged as the divinely appointed leader. As the burden of governance grew, he appointed others to help him – 'able men, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain' (Exodus 18.21). So began the era of the judges.

Early biblical references to monarchy depict theocracy as more desirable, and in a fallen world God seemed to accept the need for a king (Judges 8.22-23; 1 Samuel 8). Saul was God's appointment, and his successor is not one of his children but David, as revealed to Samuel the prophet. The subsequent history is messy and muddled, marked as much by intrigue and violence as by calling, dynasty, constitutional right or personal qualities.

No model for us there, then. Where executive power is focused in an autocrat, things rarely work out well. In a secular state there is no 'higher' accountability – perhaps we should ponder this as our own state rapidly becomes more and more secular; in modern theocracies where accountability to the divine is proclaimed, we often see the kind of falling away to which Israel's and Judah's leaders were prone. And so the need for the

ballot box.

How do we Identify a leader?

So how do we identify a leader? We look for someone who's got followers. Obvious? Yet often forgotten! Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and a 'very large crowd' address him in kingly – messianic – terms. Rejecting intrigue and violence, Jesus demanded no pre-eminence and yet his authority was evident to all who would see it.

Today, our vote indicates our willingness to follow. But consideration and care are needed – Moses did not get God's vote because of his eloquence or, in today's parlance, his skill as a media-savvy spin doctor (Exodus 4.10).

More difficult is the discussion about choosing a head of state. There is no logical way of distinguishing a successor apart from finding 'the best person' – which leads back to the ballot box. But money and influence can be very significant in electoral processes and the apparent equality of opportunity often remains false.

A few verses before the Palm Sunday Gospel, Jesus explains that, 'The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants ... but whoever wishes ... to be first among you must be your slave...' (Matthew 20.25-28).

Jesus' model of leadership is represented by the donkey, the beast of burden. It is said that good leaders 'hold the vision' and are 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the rest of the team.

Has any human showed such clarity of purpose as Jesus Christ, who, in the words of the Palm Sunday Epistle, 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And ... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross'?

Amen