

I remember ringing Rachel's dad from St James Hospital, Leeds, to tell him that his daughter had given birth to a daughter, our first child. We were to call her Ruth, after Rachel's dearly departed mum and his late wife. Not many words, but my goodness me, such emotion, I felt my heart swelling with every syllable. I, an experienced public speaker, him, a brave captain in the Royal Artillery just blubbing at each other really. Whatever, I just had to tell him, because it was the best news ever. Good news – It's going to be wall-to-wall sunshine tomorrow! Good news – I've got a place on the teacher-training course! Good news – She's said yes, she'd love to marry me! Good news – She's given birth to a baby boy, weighing in at 7½ lb. When you've got good news You want to shout it from the roof-tops. Sometimes the more personal the good news the more difficult it is to get the words out, your emotions are running so high.

Evangelism simply means sharing the good news, the good news of Christ. It is the very best news ever: Christ living and dying and rising again to show how much he loves you. It's high emotion but you just can't keep quiet, you've just got to share it. And yet all too often carrying the best news in the history of the entire world we say nothing. 'They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,' are the words with which Mark's Gospel ends, about the women who find the tomb empty and are told by an angel that Jesus is risen. Surely they should be shouting it from the roof-tops! Against all the odds, your home team has won the championship of championships. Surely they should be hoarse with shouting about it. But they say nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

Afraid of what? Afraid that they would be thought mad. Afraid of connection with the one who had died so awfully. What they had done to him they might do to them. Afraid of men writing their message off yet again as hysterical nonsense, just women's talk, even doubting themselves, wondering if they had dreamt it.

Maybe also afraid that this was mind-blowing stuff, universe-blowing stuff, that their lives and the world would never be the same again. If mixing with the riff-raff and marginalised, if loving your enemies, even

forgiving them when they crucified you was where God was really at, then that made one heaven and hell of a difference. You had to tear up the how-to-behave rule books And start all over again. Better to stay safe, at least you knew where you were in the old world of violence and resentment and revenge where dead men stayed dead, cold stone dead. Resurrection can be so inconvenient. Why do we say nothing to anyone about the best news in the world? Well all those reasons I've mentioned really, seasoned with a bit of good old British stiff-upper lip about keeping our emotions under wraps, not wanting to intrude on the personal lives of others.

Or maybe we don't think it is the very best news in the world. Maybe we are luke-warm, half-hearted, don't really believe in it. Or maybe we realise in one sense it could be very bad news indeed. Certainly is in some parts of the world. Women in Bagdad joining the Mothers Union are asked whether they really want to nail their colours to Christ's mast, because their MU card could well be their death warrant.

I really don't think you need a lot of words. You do need a lot of courage. You do need to look into your heart and know yourself where your true loyalties lie. In some ways it is easy for me. For thirty eight years of my life I have worn a white dog collar which shouts, 'Like it or lump it, I am for Christ!' The dog collar means I can't retreat, there is no where I can hide my faith. What's your version of a dog collar?

Very occasionally I have been mocked, the cat calls, 'Naa, it's a vicar!' Bu that has been very rare. More often than not it has been a smile returned, a friendly word, even an admiring glance, that here is someone who has put his life on the line for Christ. You can be a rallying point.

In the courtyard of the High Priest Peter had seen Jesus stripped and beaten, and I guess his courage failed him, fearing that he'd be the next in line for such treatment. But he could have said, 'Yeh, I do know the man of whom you speak. He is the Lord of my life and all of life. Have you got a problem with that?' And who knows. 'Well, funny thing, but he's the Lord of my life too, he brought my Uncle Jairus' 12 year old daughter back to life!' There is a story of a bishop visiting Moscow at

Eastertide in the dark days of Stalin with purge after purge against Christians. He stayed in the Imperial Hotel a very grand place, harking back to the days of the Czar. For obvious reasons he was in civilian dress, but one morning he availed himself of the barber's shop in the basement to have a shave. All women barbers – cut throat razors. The lady who was shaving him was built like a 1960s Russian Olympic shot-putter. As she raised the razor for the first cut, she noticed the amethyst ring on the bishop's right hand, which he had forgotten to take off. 'Are you a bishop?' she asked in broken English, the razor still poised. 'Er, yes, I am,' he replied, fearing for his life. 'Alleluia, the Lord is risen,' the woman cried. 'He is risen indeed, Alleluia,' all the other barbers chorused. You never know.

You don't need slick words, or many words. Just five, really: 'Actually I am for Christ.' We all like to be one of the boys, one of the girls, but a moment comes when it's the right time or the wrong time for the right word. More often than not it will be actions rather than words, not passing by the wounded victim on the Jericho-Jerusalem by-pass, but picking him up, not going with the crowd, not giving in to wrath, refusing to demonise, refusing to denigrate the victim, refusing to make a scapegoat. I go to a lot of meetings, and often meetings hunt in packs, pick on some poor soul, usually absent, whom they deem incompetent. I don't go along with that, because actually we are all incompetent, and who wouldn't be incompetent when it came to the things of Christ. Do not judge, lest you be judged.

I think you've got to be happy in your Christian skin, really. And if you're not, make yourself happy. Argument weak, shout loudly! was one comment in the margin of a speech. Sometimes people fire broadsides at other ships as a distraction that their own boat is not seaworthy, riddled with woodworm.

'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' was the slogan humanists daubed on London buses. 'There certainly is a God who loves you as his cherished child. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing! So get over yourself and spread the word.'

And once you're relaxed in your Christian skin, then you can even laugh at the ridiculousness of the stupid things that fill our day. Don't be fazed by Richard Dawkins and new atheists. If you want an intellectual argument, here goes: Books like *Do we need God to be good?* by Chris Hallpike, a leading anthropologist, set out an intellectually robust defence of Christianity and an equally intellectually robust and scathing critique of atheist thought-systems and utopias. Universal Darwinism, bankrupted by a gladiatorial theory of existence, can never generate a reverence for human life or the created order, because mind, free will, consciousness, personal identity and universal purpose are deemed illusions in a basically materialistic universe. In such a system martyrdom and human dignity are absurd, because a theory of evolution devoid of any creator, driven by natural selection and the survival of the fittest, is bound to be on a direct collision course not with the Genesis, all that God made the world in seven days stuff Rather it is on a direct collision course with the Passion, where the ultimate broken victim, the lowest of the low, is hailed as lord of lords and king of kings. The survival of the unfittest is the heart of Christianity

But a better tack is trying to get people to laugh at themselves. You couldn't meet a lovelier man than Rachel's brother John, who is an atheist. He stays with us every Christmas, but coming to church would for him be a betrayal of the intellectual high ground which he sets his life by. One Boxing Day afternoon I sat with him, both of us riveted by a Star Trek movie. It's the one where the earth of the future is threatened by a cosmic mother whale returning to the solar system to find her babies, who sadly have become extinct making her very cross, so cross she's torching the earth.

Kirk and his crew go back to 1968 and transport a sperm whale in the SS Enterprise through two centuries, as you do, and release it into the boiling oceans, thereby satisfying Big Mummy Whale that all is well.

We sat spell-bound, on the edge of our seats. Cosmic mummy whales, going back and forward in time with sling shots around the sun, transporting a whale in a spaceship, we both lapped up. 'So, John, your

problem with the virgin birth is...' I teased. When the girls were little they used to ask why John didn't come to church with us. 'He's an atheist.' 'What's one of those?' 'Someone who God hasn't discovered yet.' That's disarming. 'Give God a break, he's got a lot on his plate what with Donald Trump and Syria and Brexit. Don't fret, he'll get around to you eventually!'

I want to end with a case study I came across recently. Rachel was sorting her stuff and came across a circulation list for the church magazine round she'd had as a girl. I pressed her for more details. It was when she was in her early teens, attending a very grand church, St Georges, in Sheffield City Centre, where he father was churchwarden, as was his father, and his father before him. For ever and ever, Amen. The parish was small, just a couple of thousand people, poor, living in substandard housing, maisonettes with open landings which now feature as the scenes of gruesome deeds in crime thrillers. Hardly anyone attended St George's from the actual parish, but the congregation consisted mostly of well-to-do people who like Rachel and her family drove in from the outlying leafy suburbs.

Rachel was confirmed with two teenagers, very poor girls from the maisonettes, and obviously something stirred in her and made her want to do something. So one Sunday morning she went knocking on the door of each maisonette, asking if they would like to take the church magazine. Amazingly she got 36 takers, and until she left Sheffield to go to university, she went around each month, delivering the magazine. No one could afford a yearly subscription, so each month she had to knock on the door collect the 10p for the magazine, as well as having a chat, usually on the doorstep, sometimes invited in. This is a young teenage girl going alone with a pile of church magazines into what the local police would term a hell-hole. The police would only visit the place in pairs, complete with body armour.

But that's the sort of thing we should be doing. Evangelism in action. I was once at a Bench of Bishops meeting in Llandudno bored out of my mind, discussing stuff that was never ever going to happen. 'Let's

suspend business,’ I said ‘Go out into the town and knock on doors and say, “Hello, I’m a bishop. How can I help you?”’

But two caveats. I thumbed through two or three of the magazines which Rachel had delivered forty odd years back. The content was quite academic, a treatise from the Vicar on the importance of holidays, an article about the perils of Series Three Evensong, a few obituaries, features on higher education and stewardship, a proposed trip to a Well-dressing and the York Mystery Plays, articles encouraging the faithful to be surgeons or policemen or teachers. It is not easy producing a church mag month after month. I did it for 22 years, so I know. But I guess the 36 folk in the maisonettes to which Rachel was faithfully taking out the magazine month by month, would be baffled by most of the magazine’s content. They would rarely be able to afford a holiday about which the vicar so wildly enthused. They would have a low view of the police, subject to repeated harassment. Fantastic communication channel, communication!

One of the magazines advertises a Shrove Tuesday party held in the Church Hall. Had one of the maisonette residents been brave or foolish enough to have gone along, they would have been treated to a little play, a skit mocking the bishop and cathedral dean who had tried to foist a low-churchman on St George’s as their new vicar. The wardens in the skit then discussed their actual new vicar, wary of the fact that he came from Ireland, land of the troubled, the thick and the catholic – I’m quoting from the magazine here! To make matters worse, the new vicar was a graduate of the University of Strasbourg, so may well have been infected by continental Lutheranism, of all things. The new vicar then enters the stage, wearing one of his wife’s wigs and sporting a guitar. Shock, horror! Even though everyone outside the narrow circles of the church looked like that in the 1970s.

In Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure*, Jude and his wife Sue, in a Victorian Oxford wracked by religious controversy, have made the utterly dreadful discovery that all their children have taken their own lives so not to be a burden to them. *There was another stillness, broken at last by two persons in conversation somewhere without. "They are*

*talking about us, no doubt!" moaned Sue. "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men!" Jude listened, "No, they are not talking of us," he said. "They are two clergymen of different views, arguing about the eastward position at the altar. Good God, the eastward position, and all creation groaning!"* Three questions for us would be evangelists. What communication line can you open? What will you communicate? What will people be met with when they respond?

‘I am for Christ... ...because he is the love of my life. He made the deaf hear and the blind see, the lame walk and raised the dead, and said to those who felt utterly forsaken and lost, “Take heart, I have found you, I am with you, till the end of time.”’ Who are you going to say that to today?