



New Year Message 2014: Lessons from a walk!

In the Summer of last year I went on many long walks in some woods not far from our house. On one of these walks the Lord seemed to speak to me in about our calling as Christian musicians.

The walk is normally a 45 minute round trip, but this time it was considerably longer as I stopped several times in order to listen to the Lord's voice.

The parable of the talents

At one point on this walk the parable of the talents came to mind:

...To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'... Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.

For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. (Matt 25: 14-29)

If God gives us gifts and talents we have a responsibility to nurture those talents well and produce more from them. We have a responsibility to look at ways of investing our gifts to maximise the return we get from it on behalf of our Master. We should seek to be creative in looking for opportunities to use this gift that God has entrusted to us. That may require some risk in order to bring the greatest return.

Riches stored in secret places

As I thought about these things, I was also reminded of a passage in Isaiah 45:

This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. (Isaiah 45: 1-3)

I believe that the riches referred to here is the treasure of people's lives. There are riches that Satan has locked away in his domain that often the church has little or no access to. And it is increasingly well guarded as we become an ever more secularised society who completely shun the church and any teachings of faith. Yet, there is a longing in so many to know more about life. This is where we come in. We as musicians have access to these secret places that few others have. It's good to ask God for his help in releasing this hidden treasure - to use the gold God has given us to buy the gold of people's lives.

Bill Johnson writes the following in his book 'Dreaming with God':

'Prophetic ministry is not to be focussed on the sins of the world. It takes very little discernment to find the dirt in people's lives. The prophetic in its purest form is designed to find the gold in people's lives and call it to the surface. This approach changes the attitude of the world towards the church, and makes it possible for us to be contributors to society, not just confronters of all that is evil'

Hidden - even in the middle of enemy territory

After a while I noticed some unusual looking birds wandering in the field in front of me. They looked rather like peahens (female peacocks). I saw 2 of these birds walking around in the field, but then spotted another walking in long grass to my right. It was barely noticeable as the grass was high. The grass almost completely concealed it, but it was free to move about. It felt as if God was saying that we as musicians have free access into enemy territory and be barely noticeable as different. This is why we need to be careful about how we're seen and only reveal our 'true colours' on the occasions when we know it is right to!

We must ensure our motives are not just about making converts, but spreading the fragrance of Jesus and doing all things well to make a difference in the world and in people's lives.

Again Bill Johnson wrote the following in his book 'Dreaming with God':

The church is sometimes known for its willingness to serve, but usually with well-meaning spiritual agendas as the ultimate goal. It almost sounds blasphemous, but serving simply to get people saved is a religious agenda. As pure and noble as it may seem to us as believers. It is manipulative to the world, and is viewed as impure service. the world can smell it a mile away.

Overt ministry is very common for us, but this is only half of the needed ministry equation. The other half is covert ministry. The word covert means 'hiding place'. This refers to ministry that is more subtle in nature. It is hidden not because of cowardice but rather out of wisdom.

It works within the systems of this world to bring about change by re-establishing the proper norms of thought, beliefs, disciplines, and relational boundaries. In other words, we work to change the culture.

A few months ago I sent out a link on the Musicians Network mailing list to an article about how to discourage artists in the church. In that article the writer said that church leaders often have the following agenda:

Demand artists to give answers in their work, not raise questions. Mark Lewis says, "Make certain that your piece (or artefact or performance) makes incisive theological or moral points, and doesn't stray into territory about which you are unresolved or in any way unclear. (Clear answers are of course more valuable than questions)." Do not allow for ambiguity, or for varied responses to art. Demand art to communicate in the same way to everyone.

As Lesley Sutton shared with us so eloquently in September, we must avoid trying to fulfil the demand from some Christians that a clear evangelical gospel message has to be conveyed unambiguously in everything we do!

The same article quotes artist Makoto Fujimura answering the following question in an interview at The High Calling: "How then do you see art as evangelism?" He says:

There are many attempts to use the arts as a tool for evangelism. I understand the need to do that; but, again, it's going back to commoditizing things. When we are so consumer-driven, we want to put price tags on everything; and we want to add value to art, as if that was necessary. We say if it's useful for evangelism, then it has value.

And, there are two problems with that. One, it makes art so much less than what it can be potentially. But also, you're communicating to the world that the gospel is not art. The gospel is this information that needs to be used by something to carry it.

Only, that's not the gospel at all. The gospel is life. The gospel is about the Creator God, who is an artist, who is trying to communicate. And his art is the church. We are the artwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works. If we don't realize that fully, then the gospel itself is truncated and art itself suffers.

Again in this article, Francis Schaeffer is quoted as having once said:

For a Christian, redeemed by the work of Christ and living within the norms of Scripture and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the lordship of Christ should include an interest in the arts. A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God—not just as tracts, but as things of beauty to the praise of God.

If you've not done so already, do have a look at the whole article here:

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/05/28/how-to-discourage-artists-in-the-church/>

Also, if you haven't already, do watch Lesley Sutton's talk here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQeLCTPPh-k>

I will talk more about the importance of sharing our faith in words *at the right* time a little later in this message.

Dealing with the difficult stuff of life - pain, grief etc.

As I walked on a little further, a good friend, Lesley Oake, came up the path towards me walking her dog. Lesley was the wife of DC Stephen Oake, the policeman who was stabbed to death a few years ago in Manchester (Wellspring played at the very high profile funeral service in Manchester City Centre). What Lesley went through at that time is unimaginable, but she's not had it easy since. She's had terrible stomach problems over the last few years and been in hospital on several occasions to try and sort out the extreme pain she's in.

So often our worship music and also the teaching we hear speaks about victory, healing and a life free from pain. There is some truth there of course, but the reality of life is often a different story, and we're called to reflect that in our ministry with music. We meet people exactly where they are and rather than offering a sugar-coated pill, we identify with them in their suffering. This means our music is legitimate even when it sometimes sounds like it is filled with pain without resolution. We shouldn't shy away from such discord! Meeting people where they are is so powerful and can bring a healing that simple platitudes can never touch.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. (Romans 12:15)

A strong wall of protection

As I walked on there was a strong, high fence beside me. Suddenly an angry dog started barking at me and trying to jump up at the fence. Although it could have been frightening, I knew the dog had no chance of getting to me as the fence was too high and too strong.

Many of us will face opposition and discouragement from the enemy - especially as we go into his territory to seek to plunder it, but God has put a strong wall of protection around us which the enemy can't find a way through. We will need to walk closely with God, though, for that wall to be secure!

Here's a passage in Psalm 71 that seem relevant:

*In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me. Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.
(Psalm 71:1-3)*

Be patient and wait for the Lord

As I neared home I had to cross the road in order to continue on my way. It was a very quiet morning with very little traffic (it was rather early in the morning!). However, every time I tried to cross another car appeared and I had to wait. I felt that there would be times when we would feel frustrated as we want to move ahead, but that if we remain patient, God will provide the way ahead and give us opportunities at the right time.

*I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. (Psalm 27:13-14)*

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. (Psalm 130:5)

We're on a rescue mission!

Finally, just as I arrived home, a neighbour rang the doorbell and was clearly in a panic! She'd been asked to look after Pete & Shirley Richard's cat while they were away. She'd put out food the previous day and came back later to see that the cat hadn't eaten any of it. She went in next morning and still the food was untouched with the cat nowhere to be seen. She began to call out and eventually heard some scratching from upstairs. She discovered that the cat had been accidentally locked in the loft with no way of escaping (she'd been there over 24 hours). As she couldn't get the loft ladder down she came round in a panic to ask me to come and help. I managed to get the loft ladder down: the cat was freed and all was well!

It is important to know that everyone needs a Saviour. Even though 'getting people saved' shouldn't be our only or main agenda (see above), we are called to be of God's agents who God will send at times on rescue missions - even when people don't realise the peril they're in!

My whole being will exclaim, "Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them." (Psalm 35:10)

He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. (Psalm 72:14)

The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. (Ezekiel 34:27)

So we do need to pray for God-given opportunities to share our faith. It is good pray that the Lord would open up possibilities for sharing the hope that we have in the gospel, but let's make sure it is at the right time:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15)

Final thought

In all of the above, God said that he loves us all and that we are to know ourselves as 'friends of God':

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15: 14-15)

We will function best when we know that we are friends of God!

- Richard Williamson Jan 2014