

Dan's sermon from 17/9/17

Luke 4.38-44 / a mission-focused church

Do you ever wake up in the morning and think how am I going to fit everything in today? There's meals to cook, washing to do, children to ferry around, bills to pay, reports to write, forms to fill in, phone calls to make, meetings in the diary ... on and on the list goes. At the end of pretty much every day I tend to think, "Yes, I did that and that and that. But I didn't get to do this and this and this." And I get frustrated. Even those of you who are retired know all about this problem. Most of us wish there were more hours in the day and more days in the week. And especially when the needs around us are so great. Which of us, when someone asks for help, finds it easy to say 'no'?! So we try to squeeze more in.

Did you know Jesus had the same struggle? People were always turning to him, always demanding more from him, always wanting a slice of his time. He may have been the Son of God, but he still only had 24 hours in a day, 7 days a week, and he still needed to eat, sleep and go to the toilet. He had the same time limitations we do.

Let's look at this 24 hours early on in Jesus' ministry to see how he coped. He's only just coming on the scene. Verse 31. He's in Capernaum, a town in Galilee, on the Jewish holy day - and he's teaching in one of the synagogues. What was the response? Verse 32: they were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority. He was different to other spiritual leaders of the day - they just quoted other people and regurgitated other spiritual teaching. Jesus was different - his teaching was fresh, insightful, funny, poignant, powerful. People could tell his words had intrinsic authority - they could tell he was right. That's why crowds flocked to him. And that's why Jesus' words are still so popular - it's their inherent power to speak truth into people's lives.

So he spent the morning preaching. Then in verse 33 there's a man possessed by an impure spirit who kicks up a fuss. Jesus simply says, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" - and lo and behold, that was the end of the man's oppressive trauma. Again, the crowds marvel at the power and authority of Jesus' words - not just to speak truth into their own lives but to bring radical, instant transformation to the lives of the most broken, traumatised people.

Quite a full-on morning for Jesus. Time for a bit of a siesta? Chance would be a fine thing. Verse 38 he goes to his friend, Simon's house, maybe wanting a quiet afternoon watching the footy. But Simon's mother-in-law was ill. Luke, the chap who's writing down this biography of Jesus' life, was a medical doctor. Here he explains that hers was a high fever - this wasn't just a touch of flu - this was something quite serious. Simon obviously had the sort of mother-in-law that he wanted to keep rather than one he wanted to get rid of - so he asked Jesus to help. Jesus rebuked the fever, and it left her. The healing was so instantaneous, so complete, that the mother-in-law got up at once and began to wait on them.

Now, remember, this was all happening on the Sabbath, and Jewish people weren't allowed to travel until the end of the Sabbath, which was sunset. So what happened then, just as Jesus was looking forward to an evening watching a box-set? Verse 40: "the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of illness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover demons came out of many people."

So that's 24 hours in the life of Jesus - so much to do, so much to fit in! And of course, all this wasn't just physically draining. Think about the mental drain of debating with people in the synagogue, the spiritual drain of dealing with demon-possessed people, the emotional drain of working with pain-filled, panicky people all day ...

It was absolutely exhausting! I think Jesus would have deserved a bit of a lie-in the next morning, wouldn't you?

Here's the shock in the story: verse 42: At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. You might think he couldn't sleep after all the pressures of the previous day - or that he just needed a bit of

space and me-time because Simon's mother-in-law wouldn't stop thanking him for healing her. But no - whenever Jesus goes to a solitary place, it's to pray.

Here's the thing: Jesus knew the next day would be even worse. As word continued to spread about him, even more sick and injured people would be brought to him. The queue was going to be forming outside the door in just a few minutes; getting an appointment with him was going to be even harder than getting an appointment with your GP today!

And so Jesus went to a solitary place to work out through prayer what his priorities were. To work out what to say 'yes' to - and what to say 'no' to. He didn't have long, because "The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was they tried to keep him from leaving them." You see, they wanted to hold on to Jesus. They wanted him to themselves, on their terms, to heal them and help them. They needed him. They begged him. They told him all the issues they needed help with. And how did he respond? Verse 43: "He said 'I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.'" - And so he moved on - he left people disappointed.

Do you get that? Jesus said 'no'. He said, "I can see your need. I know that you're hurting. But I've got to go elsewhere." And it's not as though he had a meeting in the diary for 10 o'clock in the next village that he had to get to. It wasn't that he didn't want to let someone else down that he'd already made a commitment to. It was that Jesus could say 'no' because he already had a bigger 'yes'.

He knew he'd been sent to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God - that is, the good news that God was coming as King into this world to sort out all the mess. Look back a bit to verse 18. This is Jesus, maybe just the week before, in Nazareth, his hometown. He's in the synagogue, and his preaching ministry has an explosive start, because he reads a prophecy written hundreds of years earlier - and makes it clear that it's all about him. He said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

That's Jesus' bigger 'yes'. He knows what Father God has called and anointed him to do. And it's not just to do with all the healings that we've just been reading about. It's also to do with proclaiming good news to the poor. That's why he says, "No, I've done enough healing for the moment. Other people need to hear the good news that God is breaking into this world. I'm not just for you, Capernaum, I'm for everyone, everywhere."

He said 'no' because he already had a bigger 'yes'.

What is your big 'yes'? What is it that God has called you to? Maybe you've felt a strong call to your work. If you've got family, then God has called you to help care for family. Maybe you've felt God's call to be involved in Scouts or some other community organisation, or as a school governor or charity trustee. Maybe you've felt God's call to be active in your neighbourhood or visiting older, housebound people. Maybe God has called you to be involved with The Ark or The Beacon or Luncheon Club or some other ministry that we run as a church. Maybe God has called you to be a worship leader or a prayer warrior or some other individual ministry. What is your big 'yes'? Your calling from God?

If we're honest, when we look at our diaries, lots of us spend a lot of time on things which aren't our big 'yes'. Now, none of us are in a position where we can spend all of our time doing those 'big yes' things, much as we might want to. But if you don't know what your 'big yes' thing is - the thing that God has called you to be doing - then we land up saying a little yes to lots of things, and we struggle to say 'no' to anything.

Do you see what I'm getting at? Jesus knew what his 'big yes' was - his calling from God. And that gave him the courage to say 'no' to people who wanted his time and attention. It wasn't that they were bad things or bad people or bad requests. Not at all. It was just that God hadn't called him to

do those things at that point in that place. Jesus knew his bigger yes, and so he made a priority of moving on and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God elsewhere.

What is your big yes?

You see, my observation as pastor is that some people are over-committed, spread too thin. You don't know your big yes is, so you've said a little yes to too many things - things that people have asked you to do - or that the church has asked you to do - and they're probably very worthy and worthwhile things, but maybe they're not what God is asking of you. It's only when you know your big yes from God that you have the courage and conviction to say 'no' and focus on what God is calling you to, here and now.

We've put a couple of questions at the bottom of the Grapevine you were handed on the way in - Where has God called you to serve him? And what issues are you passionate about? We've put that second question in there because some of you won't be sure if God has called you to serve in particular areas - but you know that you are passionate about certain issues. And actually, that may well be a God-given passion. Maybe those are the areas God has called you to work in.

I'd love everyone to spend time over the next 10 days thinking about those questions. The cell groups and missional communities should be spending some time on them over the next week, but if you're not in one of those groups, you can think about them by yourselves or with someone else over a drink.

Now, I'm not suggesting that everyone can or should only be involved in one thing. I know it's not as straight-forward as that. Maybe God has genuinely called you to be involved in 2 or 3 things - something at home, something at work, something in the community. But I'd be very surprised if God had genuinely called you to be involved in 10 things. Because when we spread ourselves that thinly, when we're always rushing from one thing to the next - when are we going to have time to stop and have that cuppa with a colleague or neighbour who needs a listening ear? or to pray for people?

When we spread ourselves too thinly, we stop being effective in those things God has genuinely called us to.

I wonder whether some people here need to do what Jesus did. You've got people making demands on you from all sorts of different directions. If you carry on like you are, you'll get swamped. You need to find a solitary place, maybe early in the morning, or the quiet day in a couple of weeks, to re-connect with your big yes - to reconnect with what Father God is calling you to.

Maybe some of you need to hear this old poem - we had it stuck on the back of our loo door when I was growing up: "I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day; I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray. Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier came each task. "Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered. He answered, "You didn't ask." I woke up early this morning, and paused before entering the day; I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray."

Time is like money: you can only spend it once. If money is getting tight or you're saving up for a new purchase, you cut back on spending in other areas. You say no because you've got a bigger yes. When it comes to your time, how are you going to spend it?

What is your big yes?

But now I want to take this a step further. What is our big yes as a church? What are the things Father God is truly calling us to be involved with?

A few months ago, the leadership wardens and a few of the church staff team went to something called 'Lead Academy' - a 36 hour learning residential for church leadership teams. We're going to go back 3 times over the next 18 months or so. One of the exercises they got us to do was to

picture our church as an animal. We said we were an octopus, because we've got so many arms and legs doing so many different things.

I think that as a church, we struggle to say 'no' because we don't know what our big yes is. We see needs and opportunities around us all the time, and we think, "We've got to do something about that!" And so we keep adding to what we do. We keep saying lots of little yeses.

But that's not good for us. As individuals, we feel pressure to take on more and more, and some people begin to burn out. As ministry leaders - we never feel we have quite enough volunteers, and the volunteers we do have are busy running around organising things and struggle to make time to actually get alongside those we're seeking to serve.

Do you see what I mean? I've had this growing sense that as a church, we're spreading ourselves too thinly. We do lots of things, but at a fairly shallow level. And that means we don't have much impact for the Kingdom of God. I would rather we do fewer things, but have the time and energy to do them more deeply because then we will have more impact for the Kingdom of God.

A few years ago, some research was done in the Church of England to see what some of the common traits were of churches which were growing. Some of the traits are quite obvious: they're churches energised by faith, they have an outward-looking focus, they operate as a community, they seek to find out what God wants, they make room for all. But the last common trait of growing churches was this: they do a few things and do them well. The researchers explained that a bit more. They said, "These churches aren't rushing around madly, but are enjoying what they do and seeing the positive results of doing a quality job. They're relaxed about what is not being done."

What is our big yes? I don't think we know - and so we struggle to say no. I'm convinced that if we find our big yeses - the things God is calling us to focus on now and in the coming years, that will give us the courage to say 'no'. And as we concentrate on a few things rather than spreading ourselves too thinly, we'll have more of an impact for the Kingdom of God. We'll be people who can share good news with those we come alongside, rather than people who are too busy rushing from one thing to the next.

Finding our 'big yeses' isn't going to be easy. But we're going to spend some concerted time and effort on it this term. Obviously, we're going to spend time listening to God in prayer - just as Jesus did to discern his big yes, and to stick with his big yes when it was under pressure. We're also going to spend time listening to each other to hear what passions God has put on our hearts as individuals - that's why we want you to think through those questions I mentioned earlier over the next 10 days - it's because we want to be hearing back from you on those things. We're also going to spend time listening to our wider community - what are the needs and issues in Shirley and the surrounding areas? As we put all of that into the melting pot, I believe a picture will begin to emerge of what God is calling us to focus on over the coming years.

Let me reassure you - there is no hidden agenda here to chop particular existing ministries. But when God asks us to start a ministry, he doesn't necessarily mean for us to carry it on into eternity. It may be that some of what we currently do was the right thing to be doing a few years ago, but isn't what we should be focusing on now.

And we need your help in discerning our big yeses. We've earmarked 3 evenings over the next 3 months where we'd love as many as possible to come together to pray, to discuss, to work together as we seek God's will for us. The first evening is a week on Wednesday. It would be great to have you there. If you really can't make it, there will be ways you can still contribute - but your contributions will be so much richer if you're there in person. And there will be other opportunities to help with this, which we'll explain in more detail when the time comes.

Let's commit to working out what the big yes is that God's calling us to be involved with as individuals. And let's commit to working out what the big yeses are that God wants us to be involved with as a church - because it will multiply our effectiveness for God's kingdom.