

The Universal Gospel – Transcending Culture

What do you really want?

What do you really need?

We have just had another Christmas season with most of the hustle and bustle focussing on the success of the retail sector. Did you survive the Boxing Day sales? I was in Sydney from Boxing Day and I took LEEANNE and my mother-in-law to the local shopping centre to snap up a bargain. I was more interested in the cricket so I dropped them off and headed for home. The traffic was so thick, it took one hour to travel 4 kilometres. I almost missed an entire English innings in that time!

The commercial calendar has dominated our thinking so much now that we consume whatever is served up to us by retailers. Capitalism depends on creating needs and developing products to meet those needs. If you have a good idea and you can market it, you can be rich. Just look at bottled water. Once upon a time, we were happy to drink from a public bubbler or any convenient tap. Now, we have become water snobs and need to have the right brand of water, in a bottle, to drink. Today, bottled water is a \$60 billion dollar industry. That's more than the gross domestic product of some countries!

Next thing you know, we'll be buying air in a bottle: Oh wait, we already are!



Chinese businessman, Chen Guangbiao, sells cans of air for five yuan each (about a dollar). They come with atmospheric flavours including pristine Tibet, post-industrial Taiwan and revolutionary Yan'an, the Communist Party's early base.

Commercial interests aim to heighten our longing for things that ultimately disappoint. These things often distract us from God and from what really matters.

One of my weaknesses is watches. The only form of jewellery I like for myself, is watches. If I go to a shopping centre, I always find myself looking at the watch displays. I can't afford the watches I really want; but I look anyway. One of my favourite brands is Breitling. The men are nodding I see! Breitling watches are marketed to pilots and wannabe pilots. Airline pilots love to show them off and when I had an opportunity to buy one on my recent holiday, I jumped. Here it is! My own Breitling. Shiny isn't it!



Sadly though, on my budget, I could only afford a replica. Within weeks of coming home, it stopped working. I shouldn't have been surprised. This is the story of our world. Stuff doesn't last. Stuff disappoints. Stuff shows the futility of the things we chase.

In our gospel reading today, we see the futility of chasing the wrong things. Jesus however, teaches his followers about the most important thing in life; and that is, eternal life through Jesus.

We are going to have a look at how to obtain eternal life. We call it the gospel; the good news and it is much better than anything we can buy, eat or drink. It is the only thing that will not disappoint us.

This gospel is for all people, of all races, societies and geographical locations. It transcends all cultures.

Turn to page 865 in your church Bibles, John ch 6, beginning at v 25.

1. Futility 6:25-27

2. Faith 6:28-29

3. Food 6:30-34

4. Fulfilment 6:35-40

V 25. Opens with the crowd questioning Jesus... 'when did you get here?' This was just after he had walked on water to get to Capernaum.

Jesus goes straight to the core of their desires. *He fed them; five thousand of them!* Hanging around Jesus had a material benefit. But Jesus reminds them, and us, that material benefit is not what he has come to give us.

What God wants is made clear in verse 40 - ⁴⁰ ***For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.***

But we'll get to that later.

The crowd, like most people in the world, knew that the major driving force in a person's life is to get enough food to survive from day to day. Seeing Jesus perform miracles or signs, getting fed amongst a crowd of thousands, these things were very attractive. They still are and people are often drawn to Jesus for what they can get **from** him rather than for how they can serve Him.

The key point here is that the things of this world don't last. Jesus says in v 27 ***"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you"***.

The focus is turned heavenward, to the Kingdom of God, not the desires of humanity. He talks about food that doesn't spoil. He talks about food that endures to eternal life. How can food last that long? All food eventually goes off or at least becomes really unpleasant to eat.

Then Jesus says a very interesting thing. He says The Son of Man (referring to himself) will give them the food that endures.

Some may have doubted that he could do this so Jesus reminds them that God the Father has placed his seal of approval on him. When? At his baptism by John. We were reminded of that in today's opening Bible verse and prayer.

The other important thought is that is that the food that endures to eternal life will be *given* to them by Jesus. They can't earn it, grow it, or buy it. It is a gift from God.

And this is where **faith** comes into the picture. V 28 the people still don't get it. They think they have to **do** something. '*What must we do to do the works God requires?*' they ask. Why? Because religion demands action. Religious people feel that they have to do things to be acceptable to God; to win His approval.

But Jesus' answer is the opposite of what they expected. '*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.*' The 'work' required of a disciple is to 'believe' in the one God has sent. They want to *do* something; Jesus wants them to *believe*.

That doesn't mean that we can sit back and relax because Jesus only wants us to believe. It's a question of priority. What God requires is that we believe in Jesus and put our faith and trust in him for his saving work on the cross. That is the *requirement* but the *privilege* we have as those who have been rescued from sin and death is to serve God with gratitude and with gladness.

You see, what we do, flows out of what we have become as a result of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We have become holy, set apart, a people belonging to God; a kingdom of priests, ambassadors for Christ. That is what drives us to do good to all people. Not to make God 'like' us but to show our appreciation.

But the people in this story are still fixated on their immediate needs. *Food*. It is a basic human need and it drives a lot of our activity.

From v 30, we see a rather curious request from the people. Despite all the things that Jesus has done in their presence, the people still want a sign!

They recall the miraculous provision of manna, bread from heaven, in the wilderness and attribute it to Moses. If Moses could do it, why don't you!

Jesus reminds them that it is God who provided that bread and it is God who provides the true bread from heaven. V 33, *'For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'*

The people respond with an understandable request; *'Always give us this bread'*.

Now they are getting the correct perspective. The bread that God gives, the bread that comes from heaven, that is what we should desire. It doesn't go mouldy. It doesn't just last for this life; it provides life for eternity.

And so we come to the **fulfilment** of this story. What's it all leading to? Look at v 35

'Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

This is now the important point that Jesus is making. We think that our needs are for food and water. But these needs always require replenishing. We eat and then we are hungry again. We drink and then we are thirsty again. It never ends.

But Jesus addresses our real need. Our real need is to be secure with God for eternity: To be under His care and provision forever. And this is not just for a few privileged Israelites; it is an offer for all nations.

Jesus explains that he has come to do his father's will vv39-40: *'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'*

Friends, this has been a long introduction to the theme of this sermon:
The Universal Gospel – Transcending Culture

We must understand the uniqueness of Christ and the promises of God made thousands of years ago and developed throughout history or risk becoming lost in a sea of relativism where anything goes and any belief is a good one so long as you are sincere.

The Genesis reading is helpful at this point. Please open your Bibles at page 9.

When God told Abram to leave his country and go the land he was going to show him, he made some very big promises. Look at vv2-3

² 'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and ***all peoples on earth***
will be blessed through you.'

Look closely at the second part of v3. ALL peoples of the earth will be blessed through you. Through this covenant with Abram, God brought about the line of David which led to Jesus being born in Nazareth.

Throughout history, God showed the people of Israel how He would provide for them even when their enemies rose up against them. Through prophets, priests and Kings, Israel learned of their place in God's plan of salvation and they were given a comprehensive view of what the messiah would be like.

The messiah would be a servant King, one who would lay down his life for his people. And those who are his people are those who God himself has drawn near.

We also know that God's plan was always to draw people from all nations to himself because the vision we see in the book of Revelation, chapter 7 verse 9 is a stunning picture of the new creation.

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing

before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

In the book of Acts, chapter 4:12, the apostle Peter is being questioned by the elders and teachers of the law, in the presence of the high priest and he said this *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."*

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Philippi says *"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Jesus is a universal saviour because mankind has a universal problem and only one person, the God-Man, can fix it.

I often hear people objecting to the Christian gospel being applicable or even necessary for all cultures because we feel that we are passing judgement on them. By saying that people need salvation, we are implying that there is something wrong with them.

In a sense, that is true. In 1 John 1 v 8 the Apostle John picks up this theme when he says *"⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."*

All of humanity is affected by sin. That is a universal problem. But what exactly is sin and what can be done about it?

Let me try and illustrate what sin is like. I owe this illustration to a friend of mine who has a skin disease called Psoriasis. Psoriasis is a genetically transmitted chronic skin disease which manifests itself in many sufferers as large red patches on the external skin. It is itchy and painful. There is no cure for Psoriasis.

The symptoms however are not always evident. Sometimes, my friend appears to have very healthy skin and he is in no discomfort. But even when there are no obvious symptoms, he is still afflicted with Psoriasis and it is only a matter of time before the symptoms rear their ugly head.

Sin, is a condition that affects all of humanity. It has been passed down to us from the first humans, Adam and Eve. No race has a monopoly on sin. No race has immunity.

Like Psoriasis, sin isn't always obvious. By God's grace, most of us have some self-control but if you push us, corner us or just catch us on a bad day, we will revert to our sinful nature and the results will become obvious to those around us; sometimes painfully obvious.

Even the Apostle Paul, the great man of faith and writer of most of the New Testament, was painfully aware of his condition, his disease, the sin disease, which ultimately meant he was heading for death. He said in his letter to the Christians in Rome, ch 7 v 24 *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"*

Paul knew that he was in a desperate position just like all mankind. Just like you; just like me. He knew he needed to be rescued.

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" he said earlier in the same letter. But he doesn't leave us in despair, he explains God's amazing grace when he declares *"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

So the one big concept to take away from today is this:

All humanity is affected by sin; sin is rebellion against God. It is when we say we can do things our way; when we say we are the masters of our own destiny. It is like an inherited disease that we cannot cure by ourselves. The result is that we will die and because of that disease, we will not be able to stand in the presence of God. We will be separated from him forever.

But God, in His great mercy, sent Jesus to take away the stain of our disease, our sinful nature, and to deal with it in his own body. Jesus took upon himself the punishment we deserved and died to pay the price that we should have paid.

The result is that in eternity, we can stand before a holy God without the blemish of sin. Not only will the symptoms of sin be gone, the cause will be gone as well.

Friends, the bread we eat and the water we drink sustain life from day to day but the bread that comes from God is Jesus, the bread of life and we

feed on him by faith, with thanksgiving. That's what we are reminded of when we gather around the Lord's table at Holy Communion.

We recall what Jesus has done in his sacrifice on the cross and we eat and drink as a commemoration, a reminder, that Jesus is the source of all life and hope.

We aren't made right by taking communion but we are declaring by doing so that we are trusting in Him to take us safely home.

That is the only hope for humanity. Jesus himself said in John ch 14:6 *'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

There are not '*many roads*' that lead to God. If there were, Jesus died for nothing. Being sincere in what you believe still leaves you sincerely wrong if you ignore the one whom God sent. And that is why it is important that the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, is taken to the corners of the earth, to all nations, tribes and tongues.

As Psalm 24 tells us:

*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;*

When the devil tricked Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, he tried to rob God of what he had created to be his special possession, a people gathered unto himself.

But God was not caught by surprise and His rescue mission was put into place through Jesus. Have you accepted his offer of salvation through Jesus yet? If not, why not? We go to doctors to heal our physical ailments so why not go to Jesus to heal our spiritual ailment?

And if it is desirable for us to turn to Jesus and be saved, why not give everyone the same opportunity? That is God's will as we saw in v 40 of the gospel reading: ***40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'***

That is why we send missionaries around the world. That is why we talk to our neighbours and friends. We help them diagnose the sin problem and we offer them eternal life with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

There are a lot of good things we can do to relieve suffering in the world – and we should – but that is like putting a cream on psoriasis sores, it relieves itching but doesn't cure the problem. The most important thing we can do is to deal with the disease of sin.

Death will no longer have any sting nor will we fear facing judgement because Jesus will raise us up and present us clean and pure before the father.

So, it's a universal gospel because it deals with a universal problem.

It transcends culture because we are all members of the one humanity, created to love God and worship him forever.

So don't miss out and don't let the world miss out on hearing about Jesus. because, like the boxing day sales, this offer won't last forever.

John 6:25-40

Jesus the bread of life

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, 'Rabbi, when did you get here?'

²⁶ Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.'

²⁸ Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?'

²⁹ Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'

³⁰ So they asked him, 'What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."^[c]'

³² Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

³⁴ 'Sir,' they said, 'always give us this bread.'

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ ***For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.***'

Genesis 12:1-9

The call of Abram

12 The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² 'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and ***all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.***^[b]

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

⁶ Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring^[c] I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

⁸ From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

⁹ Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev.