

GiST Article: Speaking Well of Jesus

'Giving an answer' for our hope in Christ is one of our greatest privileges and hardest tasks. There is nothing anyone we know needs more than to know Jesus and the forgiveness he offers. But it remains one of the most difficult things we do in our everyday lives. Which words are the wisest? When to speak, when to be silent, when to ask questions? How to love well?

These questions, and many more, have increased for many of us as we find ourselves in a changing world. Certainly, God and his gospel have not changed. But our world has, so the kind of opportunities we have to speak have changed.

For example, Tia's mum is a school mum you chat with at the school gate. Your kids are friends. She says to you one morning, 'Tia's been telling me this morning how much she loves having two mums!'

How would you respond?

There are some difficulties to acknowledge:

1. Friendship relationships (especially between women) have changed. There is often no room for 'live and let live'. The only option is total endorsement of a person's self-identity and family configuration. The typical Christian response of 'I love this person yet disagree with their life choices' can be considered bigotry.
2. As Christians, we know we are to be driven by love: for others and for Jesus. These kinds of situations make us feel torn in two. How can I be loyal to Jesus by standing with him and his teaching on morality? How can I be loving to Tia's mum in obedience to Jesus? This feeling can paralyse us as we see two apparently opposing loves.
3. If I become friends with Tia's mum, her life is already deeply embedded in a set of relationships. These relationships are not in line with Jesus' call to live for him, so coming to know him might completely destroy her life.

The moment we have to construct an answer feels congested and confusing for many of us. Where do we start? How do we unpick these problems? More to the point, what do we *say* to begin with?

Here are some things to consider:

1. It's All About Jesus.

If Tia's mum never trusts Jesus, she can't know God. She needs Jesus, desperately, the same as we all do. This one core belief helps to cut through the fog and focus our thoughts and words.

That is, if I show Tia's mum that homosexual relationships are not God's intention for us and she accepts that, she's heard an important thing about God and how he wants us to live. Yet, if in the process she identifies *that* as the one thing God calls her to do, rather than to repent of all her sins and trust Jesus, she has missed the most important thing.

Our number one job, in giving an answer, is to speak well of Jesus. This is her deepest need. It doesn't mean that she has no other needs, but that if she misses Jesus and his forgiveness, she has no hope.

2. Love Isn't About Winning

'Love wins' was a great soundbite for the marriage plebiscite. It was clever. It also showed how little real love has to do with winning. Love *loves* and is inherently self-giving and sacrificial. This sets us free from needing to know the answers. We don't need to 'win' any of the conversations we might have with Tia's mum. We don't need to 'make a point'.

Love is about 'giving an answer' about Jesus, and that might be speaking about what Jesus means in our lives. We can reflect on our messy lives and what it has meant for us that we have been forgiven. We can speak well of Jesus, by talking about the reality of knowing him, how much that means to us and our struggle to follow him faithfully. We can love Tia's mum well by showing how Jesus has loved us.

3. Conversion Can Take Life-time

Sometimes we expect that God will save immediately after the gospel is presented. The reality through most of church history (with some exceptions) is that people spent years hearing the gospel before trusting in the Lord Jesus.

Understanding the gospel is remarkably simple. Yet, it does require substantial categories that sometimes take a long time to establish. God the Father sent his pre-existent Son, truly God and man to earth via a virgin birth, in order that he might suffer death on a cross, a propitiation for sins, rising again to life, and through faith in him we have eternal life and receive his Spirit.

While the jargon can be removed, the conceptual framework is still often new. Therefore, Tia's mum may take a long time to understand the gospel. It is helpful to remember this as we persevere with Tia's mum.

4. Being a Bigot for Jesus

In the past, it was possible to be both 'nice' and Christian. Increasingly, our society insists on things that we can't in good conscience affirm; in return we are considered haters. This is difficult and yet in line with what Jesus told us to expect: to be hated as he was and is hated.

We still want to be liked and have friendly conversations. The pressure will be huge as we talk to Tia's mum. We don't *want* to disagree. Yet, we may need to say things she doesn't want to hear. We might need to gently, respectfully say things like: 'The Bible says that Jesus is the only way we can know God' or 'Jesus has important things to say about how we should live and they are good for all people' or 'God has authority over us and our relationships' and so forth.

We might not choose to say much, but to be faithful to Jesus we must speak into areas of difference between us. When we are asked to endorse what we cannot, we need to be clear eyed about the cost for us and our relationship. Our primary relationship is with Jesus. Therefore, we will sometimes lose other relationships. It doesn't mean we have failed, although it may feel that way. If we stand with Jesus, someone is going to call us a homophobe. We don't need to defend ourselves or our Saviour, but we do need to stand with him.

5. Prayer Isn't an Empty Gesture

We need to love Tia's mum, truly and sacrificially. Therefore, we need to pray for her. If Tia's mum comes to faith, it will be an act of mercy by a powerful God, as was our own salvation. While we

will ask for God's help in our conversations, our constant prayer for Tia's mum demonstrates our belief that only God can save.

Praying fervently and faithfully for Tia's mum is part of what it means to love her as our own self, as it will cost us in time and emotional energy. But Tia's mum needs us to pray for her.

6. God Does Save and Sanctify

Knowing God in Christ is life transforming. The certainty of relationship with God, a face-to-face future with the Lord Jesus, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit in this life are gifts we treasure. Yet, the reality of loving and serving Jesus is that it is costly. God is unapologetically committed to our sanctification and to this end we suffer, as Hebrews 12 explains. Sanctification isn't just a necessary evil but is itself good for us, and will be good for Tia's mum, despite its likely difficulties.

We all experience sanctification in different ways, and if Tia's mum comes to Christ, she will have her own struggle. The church may or may not respond well, as the church has and has not throughout history. Our part is not to untangle things for Tia's mum, but to help her bear her burden, whatever that might mean for her and to care for her as we would aim to do with any person God brings into our lives.

Our times may be changing but our saving God is not changing. He has been saving people for a very long time and he is good at it; he doesn't need ideal times and places, or clever servants to speak for him. He is a generous God who gives wisdom to those who ask, who comforts and gives courage. Let's love Tia's mum and tell her about this God and the forgiveness he offers in Christ.