

Mind The Gap!

Margaret Hodgkinson

In what now seems like another world, MU Sydney hosted a series of seminars on 'A World of Challenge' in the magnificent St Andrews Cathedral in Sydney on 28th February. As I knew how valuable previous MU seminars were, I invited a number of women from my local church. The topic is particularly pertinent now, only six weeks later, as we all struggle personally with the sudden and unprecedented changes to our lives brought by the threat of the Covid virus. We are grappling with the need to preserve the lives of our families, the vulnerable, and indeed ourselves, while juggling the many demands of parenting, work and church. The messages we heard that day are relevant in this current pandemic because they are firmly grounded in God's unchanging Word; ancient messages that have stood the test of time over millennia of human catastrophes and suffering.

Jenny Salt shared her wisdom with us on 'Living For God' from 1 Peter 4. Her previous life as a flight attendant led Jenny to develop a passion for the television program, 'Air Crash Investigation'. This show demonstrates that many disasters unfold as a result of computer calculations and human decisions based on wrong information. She argued that such a situation currently exists in our society where women are fed false information about relationships, marriage and motherhood.

The apostle Peter addressed God's people as strangers in this world, and encouraged them to look to Jesus' example in suffering. He entrusted himself to the Judge who judges justly. As Jesus' followers, we are to imitate His attitude and live our lives for the will of God rather than for human desires or as 'people pleasers'. Indeed, this is the reason we share the good news of Jesus because He is the righteous one who has died for us, the unrighteous.

'The end of all things is near' is something we all feel more intensely now. Yet God's word gives us clear instructions to be 'clear minded and self controlled' in our present sufferings so that we can:

Pray urgently for those who need salvation. What a privilege to be able to speak to the Lord of the universe, Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, who loves us!

Love deeply because love covers a multitude of sins. We need forgiveness and love, as does everyone else!

Serve one another with an openness of heart in the messiness of life with the gifts that God has given us.

Ray Galea, pastor of a large multicultural church in western Sydney, then painted a picture of the current cultural beliefs that permeate our society. The ideas that our happiness is paramount, we must be true to ourselves and not tolerate anyone else telling us what to do, are inconsistent with Jesus' command to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily.

Sadly, a consequence of this conflict of ideas is that Christians are no longer viewed as loving and compassionate, but hateful and oppressive. The sins of the church have been publicly exposed and Jesus is now aligned with an institution that allowed and enabled terrible abuse. In addition, the last Australian Census indicated a rise in secularism as one in three people indicated that they have 'no religion'.

However, the gospel of Jesus has always been countercultural and it has endured for over two thousand years because it is true! Ray encouraged us to remain optimistic because this Gospel of Jesus is as powerful as ever. The apostle Paul demonstrated this when spoke to an audience with very different cultural worldviews in Acts 17. He appealed to their common humanity and called them to repent because God had already proved that He would judge the world when he raised Jesus from the dead.

Jesus has indeed set us free from the fear of death and so we can approach our mission optimistically, knowing that the world's solutions are not working. We have holy roles to play, given to us by God, to fulfil within our family contexts. We know that God listens to our prayers and so we can confidently pray the 'impossible' prayers and repent of our unbelief that God won't act. We can offer to pray for people going through tough times. We can learn to listen well, to offer care and resources out of love, and to share our knowledge of God's Kingdom. We can own our own failures, and those of our churches, rather than pointing the finger. We can work together to reach the lost, learn to be flexible and engage authentically with the world. As we live a life of joy in Christ, we will be powerful witnesses for Him.

Ray's wife, Sandy, leads the children's ministry at their church. She shared many personal stories as well as much practical wisdom on how to minister effectively to our children. Sandy reminded us from Ecclesiastes 3 that God has set eternity in our hearts and that Jesus delivers with a 'forever story' of hope that our children need. She encouraged us to share the words of eternal life personally with our children and grandchildren, to show them Jesus as we demonstrate prayerful dependence, love and repentance.

As a panel of women responded to questions from the audience about a range of issues affecting our children and youth, it struck me that one of the great strengths of MU is that God has gifted us with one another as we engage with the tasks that God has given us in a challenging world. My group of women all left with a renewed confidence in God's provision for them in their particular roles, as well as many practical resources to assist them in the important task of preparing their children for life and eternity. One woman typed up a summary of the talks and we've shared the recordings from the MU Sydney website with the rest of our church community. I hope that this little summary will encourage you to do likewise.