

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Mission multiplier

Presented by Bob Smith

Senator Robert Kennedy, who was assassinated in the 1960s, always lived in the shadow of his older brother, President John F. Kennedy, who was also the victim of an assassin's bullet. And while most people remember J.F.K.'s famous words: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country", they may not be aware of some, in my opinion, equally famous words by the younger Kennedy who said: "Some look at the immense problems confronting the world and say, why? But I dream dreams of how it could be and say, why not!"

The story of the church has always been the story of people who refused to be put off by what seemed to be insurmountable odds. They were, and are those who refuse to say 'Why is it so difficult?' They are the ones who dream dreams of what could be and say, 'why not'. They are part of a great tradition that goes right back to the original band of disciples who saw Jesus take 5 loaves and 2 small fishes and multiply them so that they fed a multitude of hungry people. In witnessing this, those disciples learned never to say 'why?' to the great challenges Jesus gave them, but to dream of what could be and say, 'why not!'

The story of how Jesus fed 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fishes (John 6:1-13) is a wonderful example of that attitude that sees an opportunity in every challenge. The location of the story is a hillside on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. A huge crowd had followed Jesus there hoping to see him perform miracles of healing and to hear his teaching. As he saw them approaching he asked Philip, one of the disciples, where they would get enough bread to feed this crowd. Philip responded by saying in effect, 'You've got to be joking. We haven't got the resources for that. It can't be done.' He was probably also thinking that it was unfair of Jesus to even suggest such a thing and put them on that kind of guilt trip.

This story is repeated day after day in the life of the Church. Jesus is constantly calling us to go out and do all sorts of things that commonsense says cannot be done. The very idea of a group of ignorant fishermen launching a spiritual revolution that would, within a generation, turn the whole Roman Empire upside down and go on to permeate the whole world as well as being the basis of western civilization, seems preposterous. But that's what he called them to do when he commissioned them to 'make disciples of all nations'. And that is what he has called every body of believers to do in every place and every generation.

The work of the gospel has never been easy, and it is certainly not easy today in our society. The secularization of our society and its consumer mentality have led to what seems to be a widespread indifference to spiritual things. And indifference, it seems, is what we are up against in our attempt to share the riches we have in Jesus with those around us.

However, it needs to be said that the church often adds to the problem by the way it does things. If you were to ask people why they don't go to church you could be pretty sure that most would say 'because it is boring and irrelevant.' It may not be true that people have no sense of spiritual need. I think it is true that many don't see the church being able to do anything about it. It's not always the product that's the problem, but the way it's presented. Bishop Bruce Wilson described the church in Australia as being like a company that

made excellent ice-chests, but was going out of business because the rest of the world had discovered the refrigerator.

However that is not always the case. There are many examples of churches full of life and vitality that effectively communicate the life-transforming presence of Jesus to people in ways that relate to the way we think and respond today. It is also true that along with the widespread indifference to spiritual things in our society, there is also a deep hunger for a life transforming spirituality amongst many. The great challenge for modern Christians is to see the opportunity in the problem and to discern what Jesus wants to do through them to meet it.

The key to understanding the deeper meaning of the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is in the middle of John's account of that event. Jesus had challenged Philip to come up with a way to feed this multitude of hungry people that had walked miles to see and hear him. Philip said it couldn't be done. But, the Bible says, "Jesus asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do."

And as we read on we learn what that was. Andrew, another of the disciples, having heard the challenge, went out to see what could be done. He comes back with a young boy who had his lunch with him – 5 loaves and 2 fishes. You can almost see Andrew coming back excitedly with his find and then realizing how silly it must appear. And he says, almost apologetically, "but I guess that's not going to go very far amongst this crowd, is it?"

But Andrew's initiative and that little boy's willingness to give what little he had was exactly what Jesus had in mind to do. You know the rest of the story, how he took that small offering and blessed it, and multiplied it many times over so that it fed the multitude.

Well, The thing I want to say to you is this. I believe that Jesus still "has in mind what he intends to do," even here in the face of all the difficulties we see. Whenever Jesus gives us a challenge, he also provides the means to meet it, even though we may not be aware of what they are. As someone once said, 'When God ordains, he sustains.' Another old saying is, 'God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called.' You may think of yourself as someone with very little ability to influence the world around you, but if your heart tells you there's something God wants your life to accomplish, you can be sure that you too are one who is called. And, when God presents us with a challenge you can be sure it will seem bigger than our resources to meet it. But it's not a case of looking to our own resources; he will provide what we need as we need it. As it was on that Galilean hillside, so it is today; "Jesus himself knows what he has in mind to do." Our task, when we talk to God about these things, is not to give God instructions, but just to report for duty.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, will he do what he wants to do through us, or will he bypass us and choose someone else because we, like Philip, see only the problems. The story of mission in the Church is the story of countless, unknown people like that little boy, who don't look at the enormity of the problems and say, 'why', but dream dreams of what could be and say, 'why not'. It is the story of thousands of unknown people who give what little they have into the hands of the Lord of the Harvest, who multiplies those gifts many times over. Sometimes they see the fruit of their labour in this life. Many, I'm sure, will only see it in Eternity.

Francis Dixon, a famous English preacher, tells the story of Peter, a man in his congregation in London who described how his journey of faith started when he was in Sydney. One evening a small, white haired man came up to him on George St, and said; "Excuse me, but may I ask you if you know where you will spend Eternity. Just think about it, will you. Toodle-oo." Peter returned to London and thought about that question a lot, so much so that he became a follower of Jesus.

Some time later a mission team visited that church and Noah, one of the members of the team gave his testimony. He said that during World War 2 he had been stationed for a while in Sydney, and one night a small, white haired man came up to him on George St and said; “Excuse me, but may I ask you if you know where you will spend eternity. Just think about it, will you. Toodle-oo.” Well you can imagine his surprise when Peter went up to him and said ‘That’s what happened to me.’

Later Francis Dixon went to Adelaide to preach at a series of meetings and he used the story of Peter and Noah in one of his sermons. And there he met another man who came to him and said, “I also met that little old man with white hair, in George St, and he also asked me if I knew where I would spend eternity, and then asked me to just think about it, followed by ‘toodle-oo’.”

On his way back to England Francis Dixon stopped off in Perth and was invited to speak at one of the city churches. He told this same story with the addition of the third man he had met in Adelaide. After the service a deacon of that church met him and said, “It happened to me too; the same man, the same street, the same question and then ‘toodle-oo’.”

He returned to his own church in London and could not wait to tell Peter, and the congregation, that he had met 2 others in Australia who had encountered that same old man. As he did so a woman, who was new to that church, came up to him and said; “I was serving in Sydney during the war and one day, on George St., a small, white haired man came up to me and said, ‘Excuse me, but do you know where you will spend eternity. Just think about it, will you. Toodle-oo.’ And I became a Christian as a result.”

You can imagine that, by now, this story had become very precious to Francis Dixon and he used it often in his itinerant preaching. One year he told it at the famous Keswick Convention, held each year in the Lake District of England, and there met another man who told him that his conversion followed an encounter on George St. Sydney with that same little white haired man who asked him to think about eternity and then said ‘Toodle-oo’.

He told it in India when he was invited to speak at a conference for missionaries and there met an older missionary with the same story; and then again in Jamaica where he met another. To Francis Dixon the story of this little old man was like something out of the Bible; how God was able to take such an ordinary person and seemingly insignificant offering, and the multiply its effect beyond all expectation. Eight people in far flung parts of the world, each of them serving God and influencing others, all because of that one old gentleman and his one line sermon.

Francis Dixon eventually got to visit Sydney and he went looking for that little, white haired man. His enquiries eventually led him to a minister who knew who the man was, and together they went to a small, neat cottage and met an elderly gentleman named Mr Jenner. He was now quite blind and close to death. As Francis Dixon gave his account of those eight people he had met in various parts of the world, and whose lives had been changed by Mr. Jenner’s simple witness, the old man wept with joy. He said that he had no idea how many thousands of people he had put that question to on George St. over the years, and he had not known, until then, if any of them had paid any attention to it. But he believed that it was his small contribution to the work of the Kingdom, and so he gave what he had. And Jesus multiplied it, and through it fed a multitude with the eternal bread of life. As he will with our contributions too, insignificant though they may seem, when freely given.

*Father, grant us the grace and faith to hear your word of challenge, and to give you what we have, so that in your hands the offering of our lives and service will bring blessing to others, and fulfillment to us. Amen.*