



Fishing with Jesus

by Sandy Fairservice

In Singapore recently I was sitting in a Japanese hamburger shop tackling my gluten-free hamburger when two young Asian men asked if they could sit at my table. I extended my hand and they sat opposite. During the course of our burgers I asked them polite questions about their lives.



They opened up to me and asked me similar questions. When I explained that I was from New Zealand and was in their country to coach communications facilitators one said, "You are very lucky." I smiled, but replied, "Actually, I don't believe in luck. I believe in a loving God who loves me and guides me." I had their attention. One sat back and folded his arms, putting distance between himself and me. The other said nothing but gazed at me steadily. Unfortunately these educated young men had to go, and we parted amicably.

As I trawl through life I am constantly meeting people at various stages of their journey towards or away from God. How do I tell which is which? As I talk with these 'fish' I throw them a tasty piece of bait, a juicy spiritual truth to test their hunger. One person will look down and away, while another will look me in the eye, and I meet their soul. These are the ones I follow with more truth.

My wife Judy and I work together on this. Sue is a home-helper, working through an agency. About a year ago Sue came to help in our home and on her first day Judy mentioned to her that she would see Bibles lying around. That was because we were Christians, but we would not be pestering her with religion. However, said Judy, if she ever wanted to ask questions we would be happy to answer them.

That very first day Sue asked a question about the church. As the months rolled by, Sue kept on asking questions about our lives and faith. Soon she became intensely interested, so Judy invited her to meet our friends, mostly young professional people. At this meeting, a Saturday seminar, Sue took over and asked these young people many probing questions, requiring everyone, even the quieter ones, to answer.

As we watched our friends responded clearly and confidently, explaining what they believed and why, and just how Christ had made a difference to their lives. It was a theological and communication workout for everyone.

When Scripture was quoted, Sue immediately wrote down the references so that she could look them up herself. Careful Sue. But Sue was meeting not only the Word of God, but also a powerful manifestation of the Body of Christ.

A week or two later Sue came to work and asked more questions of Judy, who

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presented a summary of the facts, using the "Bridge" illustration. Sue then declared that she had believed in Jesus, pointing to the diagram. She still comes to work in our home, and Judy has many chats with her.

Sue comes from a different social and economic group to our young professional friends, yet we were all able to communicate. But hang on; surely you have to be like the people you share Christ with? Not necessarily.

A few years ago I was desperately trying to salvage the vestiges of my youth in a gym when I spotted a young man at least 20 years younger than I across the room. Coming closer I greeted him, and he replied forthrightly, looking me in the eye.

I asked him about his occupation and he asked me the same. I was a writer and journalist for a Christian organisation, I told him. He didn't run away. Instead, he said, "I'm into right-wing politics." I said, "It will take more than right-wing politics to save the world." "How is that?" he asked. "The problem with the world is its people," I replied. "Only God can mend the human heart." After some more contact with this young man, I invited him to dinner. Then he came again, and this time we got seriously into the Bible. A few weeks later he believed in Christ.

An Asian friend of mine is a missionary in a country where the gospel is unwelcome. Many years ago he was sitting on the veranda of his student accommodation in New Zealand when a New Zealand student explained the gospel to him.

This Kiwi had no idea that the young man had heard nothing of the gospel and knew nothing of the Bible. Yet he listened to the presentation and believed in Christ then and there. God had prepared his heart, and he responded to the powerful message. Humanly speaking, it was an unlikely match. But we are not speaking humanly, are we?

In New Zealand there is concern that we Christians are fishing in a dwindling pool of people who have remnants of knowledge of God and the Bible. It is said that we must adopt a pioneering, missionary attitude and cross into the local, totally pagan culture from our Christian culture. I can't speak for all Christians but my experience is that there are fish all around me, fish that are swimming towards God, and that it is not difficult to communicate with them, whatever the sub-cultural differences.

We are all human beings with common needs and remarkably common experiences. We all need to make a living, be reasonably comfortable and want to provide for our children. We would also like to be sure that death won't be too bad and that we will be all right in the after-life, whatever that is like.

Christians can identify with these needs easily and can humbly offer good answers to seekers' questions, even though the seeker is in a different socio-economic or sub-cultural group or language, and has come to their viewpoint by a different route.

We humans are the products of many influences - family background, society's ways of thinking, its culture and traditions. We are affected by our genes, our schooling, even our exposure to truth. In the West truth does get good exposure, even though many bewail the secular nature of their country.

For a start, if you believe what the Bible has to say, God has put a longing for himself into every human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11). It is up to the individual what they do about this truth. Then in many lands there is that fading, reverberating heritage of Christendom, be it ever so quiet.

From day to day it is surprising how many reminders of spiritual truth a secular person will receive. It happens when they stumble on a Christian radio station. On television, the Halloween edition of "The Simpsons" presented heaven and hell, the devil, St Peter and good deeds within five minutes.

A Christian friend visits a non-Christian and without saying a word is a reminder of God. A billboard throws John 3:16 in their face. A man in the football crowd unwraps a sheet and holds it up to the television camera. The same reference! On the television news a man in distress says that only his Christian faith enables him to hold on - what does this mean?

On a camping trip a son asks a father who put the stars in the sky. A Sri Lankan

immigrant tells how he stood in the jungle in the night and, looking at the sparkling heavens, thinks of a Creator. Churches with crosses - what do those crosses mean? (The lady who used to style my wife's hair asked Judy, out of the blue, "So just why did Jesus die on the cross?")

Or it's Easter, or Christmas - I once helped a young man to faith starting from my question, "Do you know the meaning of Christmas?" Need I go on?

These bits and pieces of God's revelation, the fear of death, the presence of pain and the faithful witness of many members of Christ's body go deep inside my secular friend and begin to ferment. One day, this apparently rank unbeliever comes to a crisis and has to deal with life and death, the real issues - and God's truth. And I want to be there to help that person come to faith.

God sends us all many opportunities to pass on the message, but we don't always take them - I know I certainly don't. Maybe we don't think quickly enough, and the moment passes. Perhaps one day we are out of touch with God, distracted by the worries of life, our eyes more on the circumstances than on the Master of them.

Who can say what might have happened had we opened our mouth? Each time I miss an opportunity I feel badly, but somehow this gives me more resolve not to miss the next one.

So I go through life looking for those people whose hearts God has already touched. After all, it is not just up to us. Self-effort evangelism is not a biblical concept. According to Acts 17, God has been working long before we came on the scene, organising where people live and how long they stay just so that they get the best chance to hear the good news about salvation in Christ.

According to Jesus, the Son and the Father are working in the world.¹ James described how God was calling people out of the Gentiles to join the ranks of the saved.² God does have an eternal plan, and I want to be part of it. According to Jesus, the fields of grain (to change the metaphor) are *already* ripe to harvest.

To be sure, not everyone I approach is sympathetic. Some fish may be swimming away from God, but I might be the agent who changes their direction. Having lost most of my self-serving fear years ago, I actually like clashing ideas with determined, secular people. "I used to believe that once," someone says to me. So I ask why they have stopped believing, and challenge their point of view.

"I believe in evolution," someone else says. "Why do you believe in that?" I ask. "What evidence do you have that we all came about by chance?" So I follow their logic and pull the rug from under it. Then I present the alternative.

"But that's OK for you. I don't know all that science." I can hear the excuse already! Well, I'm not a scientist, not even a theologian, just an ordinary, intelligent fellow who cares about sharing God's truth with the seekers swimming all around me. Anyone can learn the scientific facts. Further, anyone can study the Bible and learn a few verses and understand the message we have to share. Jesus can make anyone into a fisherman. So let's get fishing!

Notes

¹ John 5:17
² Acts 15:14

Sandy Fairservice has been active in personal evangelism for 35 years, ever since he became a Christian in 1966. He has been serving on the New Zealand Navigator staff since 1974 in communications and the media, and today freelances, teaches and consults. Sandy and his wife Judy, also a Navigator from way back, live in Christchurch. They have written many articles, a few books and have recently added video and internet to their media ventures.



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