

Bursting The Bubble

Acts 19:19-31

Presbyterians Sharing Sunday

25th September 2011

Douglas, our Music Director, and I have some really interesting chats in the course of our combined endeavours for St. Paul's. And I can tell you, if it was left to the two of us, we would have the world and the church put to rights in very short order! It would be done at the speed of light or even quicker!

The other day we were talking about the very important matter of pedestrians on our city streets. Douglas remarked that, as he cycled along, he was amazed how many people seemed to be completely unaware of what was going on around them. Young people especially, he observed, are so completely engrossed in calling or texting on their mobile phones that they step off the sidewalk at intersections completely oblivious to the danger presented by oncoming or turning traffic.

This distractedness, I said, is also apparent to myself as a motorist. Not only are so many people concentrating on their cell phones but they are also listening to music on their headphones, living in a little world of their own, in a sort of subconscious, hypnotic state, isolated from all that is happening around them. And this is not just a fact of life here in Peterborough, but if we walk the streets of, or take the underground in, any major city, whether Toronto, London or New York we will find the identical behaviour to be very apparent.

However, not only do mobile phones and iPods have an isolating effect in today's society. The internet itself has come to create bubbles that people readily inhabit. In the early days of the development of the internet, the new cyber technology was hailed as bringing people together to create a truly global community, allowing them to interact with larger and larger groups, so making them more aware of – and caring for – the world in which they live.

And this was true for a time. But now the trend seems to be going the opposite way. People may have greater access to news and information about the world in which they live but many choose to reject this and live within their own little bubble on the internet, only interacting with their few Facebook friends and not, face-to-face, with their friends in the real world.

Not only that, despite having immediate access 24/7 to news of the world in which they live, so many choose to live in a little news bubble. They only listen to that news they want to hear and tune out everything else. If, in the old-fashioned way, we sit down and watch a newscast, say at six or eleven o'clock on CTV or CBC, we hear not only the news we want to hear but, more importantly, we hear the news we don't want to hear. But now with so many using the internet as their main source

of news, they tend to be more selective and read or watch only what they want to know about, only those events that are not too uncomfortable to watch and only those opinions with which they agree.

Such bubble isolation, of course, is nothing new. St. Paul in his times lived in a bubble at the outset of his missionary work – albeit a bubble of his own making. When he came to Jerusalem for the first time after his conversion, he was so brash and outspoken in the cause of Jesus Christ that he embarrassed the early Christian community, bringing them unwanted attention from their persecutors. So, the apostles, uncomfortable with his fearless approach, decided to ship him back to his home town of Tarsus in the south of modern-day Turkey.

The amazing thing is that Paul allowed himself to be sidelined there operating his tent-making business for some 7-8 years. He was completely out-of-the-loop regarding the Christian movement in Jerusalem and seemed to be quite content within his own remote bubble. When the apostle Barnabas came looking for him, he said, with uncharacteristic reticence, that he was waiting to be invited back to Jerusalem. Just like the church member who never takes part in any congregational activity because "Nobody asked me."¹

However, before becoming too judgemental of others caught in the bubble syndrome in today's world, or in the biblical world hundreds of years ago, maybe we need to look at ourselves as a church and question our own detachment from reality. Don't we as church members so often seem to be out of touch with our world today? We have the mindset of yesteryear, believing that we still live in a Christian society which has just gone slightly off the rails. We think that all we need is a few more charismatic preachers in our pulpits along with some good old-fashioned revival campaigns, as well as putting religion and traditional moral values back in the classroom, and everything will then magically turn around. But the reality is that we live in a radically different society today. For better or for worse, the world in which we live today is a multi-religious, multi-cultural, post-Christian society where organised religion is scorned and faith is considered a non-essential commodity.

Now such developments in today's world would all seem to be very depressing. But that's only if we see them as a problem rather than a challenge. Rather than beat the retreat or curse the darkness (to mix a few good metaphors) we have to go on the attack against the isolationist, bubble mentality of our contemporary church life and employ a new mindset and a new strategy for a new age.

It is imperative, for instance, in these testing times in which we live, that we become less insulated and more proactive in finding out about contemporary trends in our world today. As a church and individual Christians, we have to talk to people in all areas of modern life. In government, education, medicine, law enforcement and social planning. We have to discover what changes and movements are taking place in the society and community around us. We have to devise a new strategy to take stock of the views and ideas of people outside the church, those alienated from organised religion as well as seekers of faith, to discover their perspective on matters of faith and spirituality today. And all with the goal of breaking out of our bubble, becoming more in touch with reality and so being able to chart a new course for the church in a new age.

But, as a church, we also live in another kind of bubble today. A congregational bubble. So often we don't see past our own church's needs and concerns – perhaps the roof repair or the heating bills or the lack of children in the Sunday School, important though these matters are in the local context. We suffer from a parochial short-sightedness that sees no further than our own corner of the ecclesiastical vineyard.

On this *Presbyterians Sharing* Sunday, though, we are called to break out of such congregational insularity and see the wider work of the church. We are called to burst the bubble of our isolation and see our part in – and our responsibility for – what is happening in the many and varied ministries of our Presbyterian Church across Canada. To see, for instance, ... what is happening in the Alamanarah Church in London, Ontario which serves Arabic speaking Christians from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. Or, what is happening in Trinity Church, Winnipeg, as it makes plans for a new building to serve the local community Or, what is happening in the Asian Christ Church in Surrey, British Columbia as it reaches out to people speaking Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi ... Or, what is happening in the growing pastoral charge of St. Matthew's, Elmsdale and Hardwood Lands Church in Nova Scotia ... Or, what is happening in the Edmonton Urban Native Ministry as it serves First Nations peoples in the inner city Or, what is happening in the Flemingdon Gateway Mission as it serves disadvantaged young people in Toronto.

Not only are we called to see what is happening by means of *Presbyterians Sharing* across Canada but we are also called to see what is happening around the world in the name of our Presbyterian Church. To see ... What Glen and Linda Inglis are doing in Malawi with the Blantyre Health and Development Commission ... What Denise Van Wissen is doing, with our support, as a nutritionist in Guatemala to help mothers better feed their families What the Rev. Jim and Ann Young are doing in Grenada with Jim ministering to the Belair Presbyterian Church and Ann teaching at a local college

.... What Dr. Richard Allen is doing in Kenya as community physician with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, helping lead the fight against HIV/AIDS ... What Dr. William and Mrs. Sheila McKelvie are doing to combat TB in Pakistan ... What Mary Gorombey is doing in with the Reformed Church of Hungary, working with African refugees, many of whom are the victims of human trafficking or the victims of racism and discrimination ... What Rev. Dr. Paul McLean is doing in Taiwan as a translator bringing the Bible to the Hakka people of that land.²

We are called to see all this – and so much more – that is happening in the name of our *Presbyterian Church in Canada* and that means in the name of St. Paul's and also in our own personal name – yours and mine. Above all, we are called to realise anew what has often been said of us in our denomination, "If we aren't *Presbyterians Sharing*, we aren't Presbyterians. It's who we are. It's what we do ... So let us continue to support one another and the work of our church, as we have been called to do."³ Yes, *Presbyterians Sharing* is not an added extra. It is an integral part of our church. It is central to who we are and what we do as Presbyterians. And so demands not just our passing interest but our passionate support.

With this in mind, let us have the courage to break out of the bubble of our self-imposed isolation and see afresh our responsibility to share with others and support the work of the church in areas further afield than our own local congregation. When we do, we can be sure that our own Presbyterian Church and, indeed, the whole Christian cause, will make new and exciting advances in the world today.

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¹ Acts 9:26-31

² Stories of Mission 2011, *The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, compiled by Karen Plater and Heather Chappell.

³ *Presbyterians Sharing* promotional material