

What a fascinating story

He said to her ... but she said to him.

Conversation is an essential part of our lives. So many things happen as a result of conversation. Lives can be transformed – and it is such a good literary device to explore ideas.

So much of the Bible is taken up with accounts of conversations. In the beginning we find conversations between God, Adam, Eve and the serpent, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, the three mysterious visitors, – and that is only the first half of the first book.

I love the story of the banter between Jesus and the Syro Phoenician woman. What is happening in this conversation? . It is clearly transformational in **some** way – but which? All we have is the written words without punctuation. What tone of voice did they each use? Was there a teasing smile or a knowing wink.? Did she **really** change Jesus' mind – or was Jesus testing **her** – or does Mark want to remind us that Jesus teaching is not just for Jews but for gentiles as well

In the second story in our gospel reading we heard about someone who **couldn't join** a conversation. Jesus enables him to hear and speak intelligibly. His life is transformed. The sequence reminds us of the importance of listening first, to take time for reflection and then to speak. In popular parlance – remember God gave us two ears and one mouth

Which brings me back to the importance of conversation.

It is so different from the written word – and so different from emails and Whatsapp messages. How much more is communicated by intonation and body language.

There is an old story about a telegram – remember them – sent from one academic to another with whom he disagreed. The text read

You were right and I was wrong

But what he meant to convey was the complete opposite

You were right and I was wrong?

I experienced a delayed and joyful transformation about a fortnight ago. A team of us from this church is preparing to present an introductory course

to the Christian faith starting later this month. Part of our planning was a conversation about publicity.

The course is called **Why?** The first sentence is deliberately a bit provocative –

Why? Why do two billion people worldwide still follow a dissident executed 2000 years ago.

It was the next sentence – the invitation that presented a problem – we got as far as

Join us as we share food and explore why faith in Jesus Christ ....

How would **you** complete that sentence?

We scratched our heads for a short while as we considered possible suggestions. I quite liked “can change the world”. One of us (I’ll leave you to guess who) enthusiastically suggested ...

“is the most exciting journey in life”

I have to confess that struck me as quite a claim – I didn’t feel entirely comfortable with it. I felt that exciting is a devalued word these days --so many things are advertised as exciting. And anyway I’m not sure that I do “exciting” – reserved Englishman that I am – and I always question superlatives- especially those preceded by the definite article – **the** most exciting?. I explained my difficulties with that wording. The person then provoked me further “Well isn’t it” – a shocking leading question if ever there was one – I froze – I certainly wasn’t going to agree with that on the spur of the moment. But over the next few days I turned it all over in my mind. What **does** exciting mean?

causing great enthusiasm and eagerness.

I think I **can** subscribe to that in relation to my faith.

What about some synonyms – there are so many- but among them we can find thrilling exhilarating stirring stimulating inspiring compelling – yes – they ‘ll all do

Taking time to think it through made exciting not only acceptable, but for me, the best possible way to describe our faith. So the invitation is

Join us as we share food and explore why faith in Jesus Christ is the most exciting journey in life.

Our reading from James looks a bit like a conversation about faith but it isn't – it's a speech . It is crying out to be read aloud as indeed it would have been when it was written. **Listen my brothers and sisters** –

But it's a rhetorical conversation with the audience – which is a good way of making points efficiently but In the absence of hecklers there is no real conversation. We need to hear it being read – or at least to imagine it being spoken. That last sentence when declaimed allows for no discussion or contradiction. Faith without works is dead. You can't get around it. James goes on to say in the passage after our reading “Do you want to be **shown**, you senseless person that faith apart from works is barren.” We are here to transform the world – to bring in the kingdom of God. So if I **were** in **conversation** with James I would say that I would prefer his ending of this section to read

### **Faith with works is alive and exciting.**

I'd like to step aside from the conversation theme for a moment We have heard a lot about this morning – in our gospel as well as in James. Faith is a word so rich in meaning. It implies things like trust, fidelity, vision, qualities that Isaiah **faith** shows in spades. When we have faith we too can see things as Isaiah describes them – that things **can** be transformed. The desert **can** blossom, people can be freed – the blind will see, the deaf will hear and we can share his wonderful vision of people flocking to Zion with singing and everlasting joy upon their heads. That must be the most exciting journey.

I'd like to finish by telling you about a conversation I had last Sunday. Over the last few months I have spent time in church when it is quiet immersed in the av technology. It has been good to see how many people drop into church when there is no service. When they enter the church seems empty. As I don't want to surprise them when they notice me I gently declare my presence. Some choose to converse. Last Sunday I encountered someone with whom I had first had a conversation a few months ago though I hadn't seen them in the interim. They chose to share something of their faith and went on to recount some transformations that they had seen and experienced. They finished by saying something I found

extraordinary and rather wonderful. As we parted they turned to me and quite out of the blue said with a smile

**It is such an exciting journey.**

I expect we all have verses in the Bible that we particularly return to. One of mine is In Deuteronomy where we read that Moses encouraged conversation about faith. Keep these words in your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.