

# *we proclaim Christ crucified*

a sermon preached on the  
*3<sup>rd</sup> sunday after epiphany*

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at

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the lections: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Jesus is sometimes presented as though he had a kind of 'business plan': We hear that following his baptism he withdrew to Galilee... and made his home in Capernaum. From that time he began to preach, 'Repent!' Seeing two brothers he said 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people'. Then he calls two more brothers. He went throughout Galilee healing, preaching the **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion* – a word translated into English as 'gospel', or 'good news'. Many crowds followed him. Indeed, in what immediately follows today's gospel Jesus takes a great crowd up a mountain and instructs them in what might be called a spiritual 'method'.<sup>1</sup> And of course later we hear him sending disciples out with a solemn instruction about preaching and healing.<sup>2</sup> Finally, at the end of Matthew's gospel the familiar instruction: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising..."<sup>3</sup>

So all this might convey the impression that Jesus had some kind of 'strategy'. For it seems that he identifies and commissions the people he needs to run the business after he's gone.<sup>4</sup> He broadcasts his message using the most effective social media of the day. He defines his 'target audience'<sup>5</sup> – and even redefines his target audience after his resurrection.<sup>6</sup> At times he made tactical withdrawals and sidesteps in the marketplace<sup>7</sup> – clever manoeuvres ahead of his climactic launch into the 'mother of all markets', Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> He seems to have devised a comprehensive business strategy for his disciples<sup>9</sup> – and to have selected and inducted an inner sanctum board, and even appointed a CEO.<sup>10</sup> He seems to have demonstrated for them a range of marketing tools and techniques<sup>11</sup> – and given them examinations to test their knowledge of the business plan.<sup>12</sup> Jesus, and the Christian faith, are often presented in this way.

But is this impression correct? Is it true? Did Jesus have a 'strategy'?

My answer is an emphatic 'No'. As I read Jesus of the gospels, 'strategy', 'business plan', and marketing seem to me to be utterly antithetical to the **εὐαγγέλιον**. Indeed, I would argue that the true meaning of 'evangelical' is the exact opposite of how this word – a beautiful word that belongs to all the baptised – has come to be grossly misused.

For our English word 'strategy' is derived from the Greek **στρατηγία** *stratēgia* – a military term which means 'generalship'. It will be immediately apparent that germane to the idea of generalship – and of the whole concept of army in which it is located – is the principle of accomplishing an objective determined to be of maximum benefit to those prosecuting the strategy. In contemporary marketplace terms, strategy is the means by which my fellow shareholders and I get what we reckon to be best for us. The many and various strategies of tax evasion and tax avoidance, likewise, illuminate the fundamentally self-centered orientation of strategy.

It might be objected that 'strategy' can also be oriented towards the needs of others – such as when a charitable or philanthropic organisation works for the benefit of those it intends to serve. There is truth in that, of course. But two insights are crucial. For one thing, the argument about altruism was settled long ago – even my finest altruistic efforts are tainted by an unconscious and secret desire for

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5-6  
<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10  
<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:19  
<sup>4</sup> Matthew 9:9  
<sup>5</sup> Matthew 10:5-6  
<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:19  
<sup>7</sup> Matthew 12:15; 14:13; 15:21,29; 19:1  
<sup>8</sup> Matthew 21:1-12  
<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5-6  
<sup>10</sup> Matthew 17:1, 16:18-19  
<sup>11</sup> Matthew 16:5-12  
<sup>12</sup> Matthew 16:20

acceptance or success in one form or another. More crucially, strategy is, by definition, oriented towards controlling outcomes – my need of, my being driven by, outcome is the problem.

So the crucial question is this: does Jesus' gathering of disciples, his teaching, preaching and healing, constitute a means by which Jesus accomplishes *what he wants*?

And the resounding answer from the gospels is an unequivocal No. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet *not what I want* but what you want."<sup>13</sup>

It is only possible to turn Jesus into a 'strategist' – a general, military or civilian, accomplishing his battle plan for 'growth' and increased 'market share' – by completely ignoring the essence of his teaching and his central action. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."<sup>14</sup>

It goes without saying that this is a scandalous idea. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For Jews demand signs and Greeks demand wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a **σκανδαλον** *scandalon* to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."<sup>15</sup> On the cross Jesus relinquishes his own desire to predict or control the outcome.

This means that any efforts to turn Jesus into a general – heading up a mighty Christian army marching as to war – are patently wrong. Likewise, any attempt to make Jesus the CEO for our church-growth business plans constitutes a gross perversion of the **ευαγγελιον**. Indeed, such efforts are in fact *anti* evangelical – for they fraudulently conceal human insecurity, anxiety, and ego-centric aspiration beneath a veneer of piety and mis-quoted scriptural texts.

This should not be construed to mean that strategy has no place – for it clearly does. Only that it must not be confused with **ευαγγελιον**. For in truth, 'evangelical' means the complete rejection of **στρατηγια** – for the very reason that strategy is, by definition, imperial, conquering, manipulative, controlling, ego-centric, self-oriented, motivated by anxiety, fear, and the desire for success and control over one's destiny.

The true 'evangelical' is the person who undergoes the baptism of Christ. God's kingdom 'comes near'<sup>16</sup> when the disciple repents of all anxiety-fuelled desire to control the outcome, to have power over destiny – instead freely choosing to drink of his cup, accepting that destiny which is God's gift. For what is truly evangelical comes not from the scheming, controlling mind – but from the pierced, wounded heart. This is the epiphany – that which is made manifest – in Christ.

It follows that 'fishing for people' can only be **ευαγγελιον** to the degree that we relinquish our desire to 'catch'. For those we feel the need to 'catch' are merely objects constructed out of our own insecurity – instruments illegitimately employed in the service of self-interest. 'Making disciples of all nations' can only be Christ-like as an embodiment of Christ's self-emptying. Thus, being 'evangelical' requires **μετανοια** *metanoia*, repentance – conscious, freely-chosen rejection of **στρατηγια**. Conversely, our addiction to strathgia is *anti* evangelical. And for the record, and as a matter of fact, Jesus never uses this word – not once.<sup>17</sup>

As for Jesus' teachings, healings, and signs, some see only spectacle – and confuse self-interested strategy with self-emptying **ευαγγελιον**. These are the crowds who initially follow enthusiastically – but who later turn lethally violent, shockingly, even using scripture as a bludgeon against others.

But the disciple is the one who 'catches people alive' – as Luke more clearly expresses it<sup>18</sup> – by relinquishing all attempts to catch anything, by repenting of the controlling mind of **στρατηγια**, by descending into the pierced, wounded heart, by drinking Christ's cup.

For we do not proclaim a successful institution called 'church' – we proclaim Christ crucified.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 26:39

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 16:24-25

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:18, 22-23

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 4:17

<sup>17</sup> The word occurs only once in the gospels, in Luke 3:14, where it describes soldiers who ask Jesus a question.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 4:19, Luke 5:10