

I can find Wally, but where's Jesus?

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Where's Wally? Do you remember Wally - the world traveller who always dresses in red and white and hides in a crowd? It took artist Martin Handford up to eight weeks sometimes to draw just one two-page sketch of the elusive Wally with hundreds of characters surrounding him, making it really difficult to find Wally. The first *Where's Wally?* book was published in 31 years ago. These books became extremely popular and as the series goes on, Wally becomes harder and harder to find, reducing his size on the page and surrounding him with more characters and distractions until he's almost invisible. For some people it's so hard to find Wally, he's so well hidden, they just give up and walk away.

I cannot think of a better illustration of what has happened in the Church. Playing *Where's Wally?* in Handford's books is far less challenging than playing *Where's Jesus?* in the Church today. When the miracle of the Uniting Church unfolded across our nation over forty years ago, I was there – and so was Jesus. He was everywhere! You didn't have to strain through sermons to hear His name or know His central place in the Church. You didn't have to play *Where's Jesus?* as we sang and believed words like, *"On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand ... I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name ... nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling ... dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless I stand before His throne ... Shine, Jesus, Shine! ... It's no longer I that liveth, but Christ that liveth in me ... "* Old songs, new songs, it didn't matter, Jesus was there! We were not a perfect Church by any means, but we were Christ-centred.

In those wonderful early days of this Church there was never any doubt that everything in the Church hinged on, had its meaning in and was empowered by Jesus, Who is the way, the truth and the life, the only mediator between us and God and the Head of the Church! In 1977 we boldly proclaimed the centrality and supremacy of Christ in our midst. We rejoiced in the Biblical truths embodied in our foundational confession: *The Basis of Union*. In the two most beautiful paragraphs in that amazing document (paragraphs 3 and 4) Jesus is mentioned no less than 29 times! (Yes, I counted them). Playing *Where's Jesus?* in *The Basis of Union* is about as easy as playing *Where's Jesus?* in the Gospels and the whole New Testament. He's everywhere! There's no challenge in finding Him at all.

In paragraph 3 of *The Basis of Union* it says:

"The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity."

I was a member of the very first State Youth Council of the Uniting Church in NSW and all we ever talked about was evangelism and discipleship - which means, all we ever talked about was Jesus! Everything the Church was and did, flowed from the power and reality of Christ in our midst as the Head of the Church and the Lord of all creation. Fast forward 42 years and playing *Where's Jesus?* has become a real challenge in many parts of our Church. As I read newsletters and documents coming from our Synods and our National Assembly, the centrality and supremacy of Christ which oozes from *The Basis of Union* and the New Testament is no longer clearly evident in our Church.

I can find Wally, but where's Jesus? Playing *Where's Jesus?* in the Church is getting harder by the day. We have to look really hard through all our publications to find any hint of evangelism or discipleship. Leading people to Christ, teaching them how to live as His disciple and make disciples was the primary purpose and dominant focus of the Uniting Church I was part of forty years ago.

What is our dominant focus today? What is our primary purpose in 2019? The world around us is hearing a lot from the Uniting Church about climate change, refugees, drug reform, domestic violence, inter-faith dialogue and of course, sexuality and same-sex marriage. But where's Jesus? Is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the Lord of all creation, the Saviour of humanity, the Word made flesh, the Head of the Church even getting a mention, much less being portrayed as the primary reason for the Church existing in the first place? Sure, Jesus gets a mention in some of our pre-determined Bible readings, in many of our songs and in some of our scripted prayers ... but when we turn up to Sunday Worship each week do we run into the real Jesus? Do we have a personal encounter with Christ crucified, risen and reigning among us? Do we actually *"walk with Him and talk with Him along life's narrow way"* or is that just a line in an old song?

Do we affirm in our own experience that Jesus lives and reigns and is part of our moment-by-moment lives? Is our Church even 'Christian' anymore in word and deed? Our ancestry is Christian, our founder is Christ, but could our current reality be a long way from His Kingdom reality? **We might be 'in Church' but are we 'in Christ?'** There's a huge difference. When we are just 'in Church,' we can remain pretty much the same as when we are in the world. We don't have to go through any transformation to just be 'in Church.' We can utter Jesus' name and sing about Him and pray to Him and go through the motions and not be any different inside. We can even call ourselves a Christian when we are not a Christian - millions of people are doing that every day all over the world.

However, there's something we just can't do. We can't truly be 'in Christ' without being changed in some way. We can't be in Christ without being 'born again.' We can't be in Christ without being transformed. The old must pass away as all things become new. Our former life is hidden with Christ in God as a new life begins - a life lived completely in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. The Bible says the disciples of Jesus will be visible in this fallen, dysfunctional world. They will be salt in the wounds of humanity and light in the darkness of a world held captive by Satan. *"By your fruit you shall be known,"* Jesus said and that fruit is a transformed life.

If you are a disciple of Christ, you are a miracle on two legs as you sing and live and breath, *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I am found, was blind but now I see!"* It's all about transformation: doomed, but now saved; lost, but now found; blind but now I see! You can't get a more radical, obvious, observable, tangible change than that - and it all happens in Christ. It's all about Jesus. He is the centre of our reality; the still point in a turning, changing universe; the reason for life itself and the absolute centre of the Church which Jesus promised to build.

Friends, Jesus is no longer the centre of the Church we are trying to build in His name and that's why playing *Where's Jesus?* in the Church today is so hard. He is so hidden, that many people just give up and walk away. Jesus is not present in a human body anymore. We all know that. Even atheists know that. Jesus died, was raised to life, ascended into heaven but He has returned to earth through the Holy Spirit Who regenerates human spirits and resides within us. This is the mystery of the Church which Paul speaks about in the New Testament: *'Christ in us, the hope of glory.'*

So when we play *"Where's Jesus?* in the Church today, where should we expect to find Him? He's not hiding in some ancient text. He's not trapped in an old hymn. **The life, the power and the reality of the risen Lord is manifested or released in the hearts and lives of His worshipping, witnessing, transformed disciples.** When you walk into a room full of regenerated, transformed, Christ-centred disciples, you will come face to face with Jesus in a way you cannot ignore and will never forget. When Jesus was here in the flesh, He always drew a crowd. He is the most attractive, alluring, captivating, loveable person in the universe and that has not changed. When Jesus is present in a group of disciples today, people who encounter those disciples want to be part of whatever they are part of because the spirit of Christ is drawing them.

Evangelism – that is, leading people into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ - is not hard if Christ is truly present - He does all the work! The only Churches in this nation which are growing and impacting the world for God are those Churches where you don't have to play *Where's Jesus?* You know as soon as you encounter a group of genuine disciples - Jesus is there. You can feel Him. You can see Him in their faces and in their lives. You embrace Him in worship. You can hear Him in every aspect of that Church's ministry because the whole Church is about Jesus.

All manner of ministry and community service will then flow from the reality of Christ in their midst. If God wants His people to do something about the environment or the homeless or the oppressed and forgotten, there is only one way God will do that: by releasing the reality of Jesus in our midst – not by giving us a list of dead religious works to do in Jesus name!

Unless the transforming, tangible presence of Christ is flowing freely through the Church – we have nothing to offer anyone! Running better programs, finding better funding, giving more time, energy and expertise to meeting the needs of our world will not make any difference. Unless we bring Jesus to people, nothing will change and unless we come to Jesus, we don't have a Church - we just have a community service organization with a cross on the wall and no power to change anyone's life!

Do you want to know why I think so many Church buildings are full on Easter Sunday and almost empty every other Sunday? Is it family tradition? Is it a cultural habit? Is it a desperate attempt to stay in God's good books at least one day of the year? Maybe, but I don't think so. I think that deep down in the depths of people's spirit, in that place where they are made in the image of God, there is a longing to be in God's presence. So they are actually looking for Jesus. I believe people turn up on Easter Sunday in their thousands because just maybe, this time, this year - they might get to really meet this Jesus Whom we declare loudly is not dead, but has risen. They come for their annual game of *Where's Jesus?* and if they can't find Him, they leave and they don't come back.

I want to repeat what I said at the beginning about the *Where's Wally?* phenomenon: *'As the series goes on, Wally progressively becomes harder and harder to find, reducing his size on the page and surrounding him with more other characters and distractions until he's almost invisible. For some people, it is so hard to find Wally, he's so well hidden, they give up and walk away.'*

Now let me change a few words and try that one more time:

As time has passed for the Church, Jesus has progressively become harder and harder to find, as we have reduced His size and prominence in the Church and surrounded Him with so many other characters and distractions until He's almost invisible. For some people, it is so hard to find Jesus, He's so well hidden now, they just give up and walk away.

I can find Wally, but where's Jesus? Wally was always meant to be hidden and hard to find. Jesus was never meant to be hidden or hard to find. For most people in our world, the only exposure they get to the Lord of all Creation is through a tiny, helpless baby born in a barn thousands of years ago. That's not the full story of Jesus. That's only part of it – and it's the part we cannot embrace personally because that story is locked in time and space. However, the key Character in that story is here right now. *Emmanuel: God with us* is the greatest story ever told and it should be told in the present tense, not lost in folklore, tinsel and bells.

I want to close with some of the most powerful words of truth ever written: Colossians 1:15-23

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation ... This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

In that passage Paul tells us exactly where Jesus is from God's perspective. But what about in our lives? Where's Jesus? What about in our Church? Where's Jesus? What about in our community? Where's Jesus? What about in the sermons which are being preached every week in our Churches; in the meetings which are being held; in the papers which are being written; in the lectures which are being given in our Bible colleges - where's Jesus?

Increasingly, over many decades now, Jesus is no longer the dominant message, the most prominent person in the room, the Name above all Names, the focal point of most conversations. Worse still, according to many of our preachers and teachers and even some of those who train our Ministers in colleges, the gospel is no longer what the Apostle Paul says it is. The gospel has morphed into something very different and the fruit of that new 'gospel' is clearly seen across the face of the Church. Our ageing, shrinking, ineffective Congregations are closing down one by one across the nation as darkness and dismay grip the world more than ever before. That's tragic. But what makes it really sad is it doesn't have to be this way. We just need to believe what the Bible actually says; we need to believe the words we sing in our songs; we need to embrace what the Church has preached and taught and believed for 2,000 years!

Brothers and sisters, Jesus called, and He wants His Church back! Jesus promised to build His Church, not some hybrid version of our own making which has some man-made ethos that has nothing to do with Christ crucified! Jesus promised to build a Church where nobody has to play *Where's Jesus?* ever again - a Church where Christ is present and Christ is Lord; a Church so strong that even hell itself will not prevail against it. That's the Church Jesus promised to build and every day He invites us to join Him in that mission.

So come, Lord Jesus, come. Take charge once again and let the world see You as You really are. Come, Lord Jesus, build your Church. Come Emmanuel, God with us. Come, Saviour of the world, come to us today, and every day! Amen.