

## Obsessed with Jesus

Once a year, TIME magazine publishes a list of the 100 most influential people in the world, drawing on a year's worth of headlines and articles. It's a subjective list, a pretty random list of people nominated by other random people, but I guess it still gives a sense of who the movers and shakers are in any given year.

Well recently another list was compiled. It was a list of The 100 Most Obsessed-over People on the Web. And the researcher who compiled the list analysed Wikipedia articles of over 600,000 living people.

He looked at things like the number of words in their article, the number of links to other pages, the number of categories a person was listed in, the total number of revisions and edits done to their page, how often it was updated. He then used an algorithm to draw his conclusions. (this guy has way too much time on his hands!)

- #1 on his list was George W. Bush the ex-President of the United States. I think George must look at his page every day and updates it!
- #2 was the current President Barack Obama.
- #3 was Madonna and
- #4 was Beyoncé.
- #5 Janet Jackson

And surprisingly I didn't make it on the list!

One of the most fascinating results was the number of professional wrestlers who have incredibly long Wikipedia articles that often go way beyond heads of state in their level of detail. Hulk Hogan was #17!

Jesus didn't make the list, but I'd like to suggest that Jesus is one of the most, if not the most, obsessed over person of all time. Even many of those who don't believe his claims admit that he may be the most significant person to ever walk the planet. His followers number in the billions and they come from virtually every tribe and language, colour and nation. People are obsessed with Jesus and have been ever since the day he was born.

This morning we talk about *Obsessed with Jesus*.

Obsess;

- to be the only person or thing that someone thinks or talks about;

- to engage in obsessive thinking; become obsessed with an idea.

That's how the dictionary defines "obsess." But what does it mean to be obsessed with Jesus? Is that a good thing? What would a life look like that's obsessed with Jesus? What would your life look like?

In Hebrews 11 there is an impressive list of some of the heroes of faith. Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Rahab and Ruth and David, Gideon and Samson. We are inspired by their stories and their feats of faith.

But at the end of the list we read Hebrews 12:1-2,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. <sup>2</sup>We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

It is great to look at the heroes of the faith and be compelled by their stories, but at the end of the day we want to fix our eyes on Jesus. He's the one who's standing just across the finish line with arms out stretched, cheering us on as we run this marathon called "Life."

I love how Eugene Peterson interprets Hebrews 12:2-3 in *The Message*,

*Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished the race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honour, right alongside God. <sup>3</sup>When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he ploughed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

I love that! Let's never lose sight of where we're headed remembering all that Jesus went through to get to the finish line. Let that shoot adrenaline through our souls. Let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let's stay obsessed with Jesus.

Back when I was a young lad I used to run quite a bit. Long distance generally. I enjoyed Cross country the most. In my early twenties I did the outward bound course, 3½ weeks of torture!! I thought I was fit before I went, but the increase of fitness during the 3½ weeks was amazing. The 3 weeks concluded with a cross country half marathon. During all the training runs I had been doing well, but the three days before the run I had been on a three day hike where I had gained a

tummy bug and stressed my knees from carrying a heavy pack down some very steep hills.

I started the marathon well. Half way through I stopped to throw up on the side of the track, by ¾ I started to feel my knees and I was slowing. A couple of kms from the end, I was pushing myself as hard as my legs would allow me to when my team mates, who I would normally beat, ran past me like I was standing still. That was very discouraging, but I was determined to finish, and finish as well as I could. I did complete the run, the time wasn't brilliant, my knees were not good, my stomach was... empty, but I succeeded, I never lost sight of where I was headed.

I was obsessed with the goal and kept my eyes fixed on the finish line because if you don't know where you're going it's going to be hard to get there. As Christians we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus to make it all the way to the finish line well. And as a church we do too.

A couple of years ago Gay and I had the opportunity to visit places that the apostle Paul hung out, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the seven churches described in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. All seven of the churches were located in the country that's now called Turkey. They all started out as great churches on fire for God. Sadly none of them are there anymore. They haven't been there for centuries. In fact, many of the towns are gone too. And all that's left are piles of rubble and ancient ruins and eerie silence and hundreds of tourists.

Show two slides

The Apostle Paul helped establish that church and wrote a letter to it that we call Ephesians in the New Testament. It was a dynamic, vibrant community of grace impacting the world through life in Jesus.

And in Revelation 2:3-4 we read about Ephesus,

*You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.*

The church had worked hard, persevered, and not grown weary. They had done what Hebrews 12 is talking about. But Jesus said, "*You've forsaken your first love.*" Those are chilling words. The Greek word for "forsaken" literally means to "release or let go of." It implies a gradual, almost imperceptible process, kind of like erosion. You don't see it happening, but it is.

In other words, Jesus is saying, "You're doing a lot of good things. You're real busy, working hard, and even taking some hits for me, but

you don't love me anymore. I'm not your first priority. You do all this stuff for me, but it's not driven by love. It's driven by duty. It's all about "should's" and "have to's" and not about "want to's" anymore. And if your heart doesn't change, I'm going to have to blow out your candle, turn out your light, and shut down your church."

So we read in Revelation 2:5,

*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*

And Jesus did. Because the church at Ephesus didn't repent. They didn't change. They didn't return to their first love.

We always want to keep Jesus front and centre around here. We don't want to forsake our first love, we want to remain obsessed with Jesus, but we need to recognise, just like in marriage, if we don't work at it, it will happen without even trying.

But how do we stay 'obsessed with Jesus' as a church? How does Otumoetai Baptist Church, a church that works hard and has persevered for over 50 years, and has not grown weary, keep that love alive? How do we stay obsessed with Jesus?

There is an analogy to describe the church and how and why people gather together as they do. The analogy talks about the difference between wells and fences. In most NZ farms, farmers build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the animals of neighbouring farms out.

But in places where farms and ranches are huge and cover hundreds of square kms building fences is out the question. It's just not a viable way of keeping the animals together. And so instead, farmers dig a well and provide a water supply in the middle of their property. And the well is what keeps the livestock from straying too far away because if they do their going to die of thirst. But as long as there's a supply of fresh, clean water the animals will stay close and fences aren't needed.

I am told that in social set theory – where they look at behaviour – the farm with the fences is called a bounded set. And the farm with the well is called a centred set. And that's the two main reasons people organize and gather together. And that's reflected in the church.

Some churches are like the bounded set. They have fences around them that clearly mark who is "in" and who is "out." They're hard at the edges with clearly defined boundaries, but might be a bit soft and squidgy in the centre without a compelling vision.

Those fences can look like *detailed doctrinal statements* that everyone needs to subscribe too or *policies and rituals and traditions or church discipline*. None of those are bad things, but they clearly send a message that you need to be like us to be here. Certainly this was how Churches were seen in days gone past.

I think these days some churches, most growing churches, are seeing themselves as a centred set. We want to take down fences and dig a deep well that continually flows with fresh, clean, living water. We don't want to create a lot of unnecessary boundaries for people to cross in order to be part of this community. Instead, we want to point people to Jesus so that they can drink from the well that gives life.

Jesus said in John 7:37-38,

*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.*

Churches that see themselves as a 'well', recognize that it is all about Jesus and he's at the heart of the community. And because the good news is so refreshing those who are thirsty are not going to stray too far away. Jesus is what keeps us together not the fences that we create.

It is so tempting as a church, or any institution, to build fences, to grasp hold of people, but instead as a church we need to dig deep into Jesus, the giver of life.

So rather than seeing people as "in" or "out," we see people on a journey towards the well. Some of us drink from the well every single day. Jesus wakes us up in the morning and tucks us in bed at night and we talk to him often in between. We walk with Jesus and can't imagine spending a day without him. We hang around the well a lot.

Some of us might only drink once a week, when we come to this gathering, but hopefully they're learning to drink more, to create those habits.

Sadly others have stopped drinking from the well for whatever reason, and part of our role as the church family is to help them find their way back.

And still others that haven't tasted that living water yet. And that's okay. We pray they will soon. We want to all keep moving closer towards the well.

If we look at the life of Jesus, clearly his faith community was a 'well', with himself at the centre and all sorts of weird and wonderful people in

his orbit – some far, some close, others edging closer, still others moving away. Some disciples were closer to the centre than others like Peter, James and John. And at least one disciple, Judas, was moving in the wrong direction ... There was a rich mix of relationships, with some nearer the well and others further away, but all were openly invited to join in the kingdom-building enterprise.

This kind of understanding allows for people to belong before they believe.

This is a good thing, not a tidy thing, not an easy thing, not a comfortable thing, but we want people to belong to this community before they believe because we want to invite them on a journey with us that will lead them to Jesus. Because the closer we get to Jesus the more he pulls us into his orbit and satisfies our thirst for life.

The whole Bible ends with this invitation in Revelation 22:17,

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." Let anyone who hears this say, "Come." Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.

How does a church like OBC stay obsessed with Jesus? By not building fences that keep people in and/or out, but instead digging deep into the well of living water and inviting people to come and drink.