

St Philips Vision Talk 1 – Mt. 5:13-16; Acts 17:22-31 - July 10 2016

Let me tell you a story. A couple of years ago I heard a talk from the head of World Vision Chris Clarke. He shared with us about the company which invented camera film in 1880, Kodak (**SLIDE 1**). They were the google of their day. Earned 10.6 billion 1981 – equivalent to 100 billion these days in revenue. They even invented the digital camera in 1975. But they closed it down because they thought no-one would buy it and because they thought it'd decrease the value of film.

Here's the thing. 5 years ago Kodak went into receivership. The question I want to ask us this morning is what killed Kodak? Variety of factors, but main answers are: they became complacent, lost focus, ignored innovators, did not change with the market, they failed to renew their vision, the organisations needs became greater than the mission. In other words, Kodak failed to adapt. **THEY DIDN'T CHANGE WITH THE TIME.**

Today begins a four week series focusing on vision and purpose (**SLIDE 2**). The aim and hope is that this will enable us to better clarify and articulate not only what God is doing in our time, but who we are, and why we are here. These are not easy questions, and by no means small ones. But, I feel there is a sense of urgency here for reasons which will hopefully make more sense after today's talk about the new world in which we find ourselves - a world that that has changed so dramatically over the last five hundred years, let alone the last century.

(SLIDE 3) During these talks Sarah and I will be referring to some of the key ideas from a book called *Changing the Conversation* by Anthony Robinson. This morning I want to lay a foundation by explaining the huge sea change in which the Western church now finds itself, and the challenges it poses.

(SLIDE 4) I guess the purpose of this talk is to help us gain understanding of the large changes and challenges that many Churches and other mainline denominations in the West are facing. This is no small task because these shifts are so deep and so large. But my hope is we'll end up with a better picture of reality and our situation.

(SLIDE 5) One of the most memorable lines from any movie comes from the 1939 classic *the Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy looks with astonishment around the new place to which a tornado has delivered her and says to her dog, "*Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.*" Many people in churches have a similar feeling. This sense that we are no longer on known ground, and yet we can't exactly name what's changed or where we are now.

These big shifts in society and culture we did not cause – so while might wish to blame these changes on others or ourselves, it would be more productive to identify and understand them and frame them in ways that help us to respond to them.

So what are these big shifts that I keep referring to?

One important way to describe what has changed is to say that Christendom is over. Note I didn't say that "Christianity" is over, but that Christendom is finished. There's an important difference.

So what was Christendom? **(SLIDE 6)** In a nutshell - that time when the Church held a dominant place in society and most people had some idea of what Christians believe. That time when we could assume that most people could understand our language. That time when the church was linked to the governing powers, to those who ruled or to the establishment.

It's important to remember that Christianity did not start out like this. For the first three centuries Christianity had a very tense relationship with the societies that surrounded it and with the ruling powers of the Roman world. It wasn't until the fourth century that Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and declared the Christian faith to be the official religion of Roman Empire – which led to the amalgamation of church and state **(SLIDE 7)**.

During Christendom the purposes of the church included: being the conscience of the community, serving as an instrument of aid to the less fortunate, and being the centre of family and community life. All these made sense in their time, and they all persist in some ways; but none of them are fully adequate depictions of the purpose of the church for this new time. The purpose of the church has shifted because the world has shifted.

(SLIDE 8) This is due to many factors: the emergence of what we call increasingly a “secular” society, the rise of multiple religious and cultural worldviews and the claim that they’re all valid, and the huge explosion of the consumer / individualistic mind-set, where life is increasingly focused on ourselves and what we can acquire.

Another big shift has been the shift from a modern to a post-modern worldview **(SLIDE 9)**. This seismic shift in values and guiding ideas away from an overarching story of reason, progress, conquest and human control has come up short in the light of environmental concerns and the loss of confidence in science and technology as reliable sources of our salvation.

You might well be thinking, “Well this is very interesting but what does it have to do with the church and its future?” In a nutshell this: over the last 500 years Christianity has been defined by its attempts to navigate the currents of modernity. My point is that we don’t live there anymore. **WE’RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE (SLIDE 10)**. These changes are not the fault of the Church, our denomination, or priests/ministers/pastors failures. It is simply to state this is just the way it is.

I wonder is the church having its own Kodak moment? **(SLIDE 11)** The church needs to face some brutal facts, confront its sacred cows, to rediscover its mission – the why we are church part. And this involves making some strategic choices because we cannot do everything.

Last November Bishop Ross gave a sermon that really made me sit up and listen. He spoke about how the Church needs to ensure that it understands the context into which it is called to make known the Good News of Jesus, and not shrink from the challenges of that. He said that “we must not be afraid to change where we need to, so that our witness to the gospel might be effective” **(SLIDE 12)**.

The Scriptures bear witness to that time and again, and we have read one of the classic passages from Acts with Paul’s famous sermon at the Areopagus in Athens **(SLIDE 13)**. Paul recognises that the gospel is for all people, not just for those whose worldview and theological framework can easily accommodate it in familiar terms.

Paul and others begin to look for new ways of communicating the gospel message. He doesn’t break down what they know and trust in, their many idols and altars. Instead he uses what is familiar to them to help them to see the possibility of God made known in Jesus. Their unknown god may indeed be known.

What are our Areopagus situations, where we have to find new ways of uncovering the presence of God who is as yet unknown to many, and for whom our familiar ideas and language will mean little or nothing?

(SLIDE 14) How will we create an agility that means in a changing environment we can survive and thrive, because we’ve learned to adapt to the change?

Will we be wise and courageous enough to realise things have changed in our time, and not to depend on how it had once been and hopefully might conveniently stay for ever?

That's the place we need to start. We need to define reality as clearly and accurately as possible. And we need to help each other understand not only how it is, but that it's not about us in the sense of blame or failure. Then we begin to talk about how we are to respond.

Theologian and writer Phyllis Tickle's book called *The Great Emergence* suggests that about every 500 years, the church holds what she called a giant "rummage sale", discarding much of what it has accumulated over the past half millennium in order to make way for new gifts and movements of the Spirit (**SLIDE 15**). What needs to be in the rummage sale, so that there's room to fit in something new?

That is the great challenge for us. But I believe that is the work we must do together. It is many decades since the effective death of Christendom. The old connecting points are fast disappearing, and we need to identify the new ways through which God in Christ may be seen and known.

This world needs churches who understand our history, ethos, values and vision; who understands what's happening in society and the real needs in our communities. This world needs churches who can foster a culture of inclusion and participation, and not be afraid to let others try things, not be afraid of change.

This world needs churches that will persevere through the mistakes and failures along the way, trusting God's call and God's purposes. Above all, this world needs churches and people who love God, and who care deeply about others, and who desire to see God's good harvest through their labours **(SLIDE 16)**.

Many have gone before us and strived hard to be true to the message of the gospel, and effective in the mission context of their time. It is our turn. What is God up to in our time? What is God asking of us here at St Philips? How might we make known the good news of Jesus in our day and in the years ahead? **(SLIDE 17)**

I want to finish with a quote by a leading person on church culture who says **(SLIDE 18)**, "Much of the time it can seem that the church we love is merely fading away, but those of us who cling to the promise of the resurrection already know that God has a way of taking the raw stuff of decay, and even of death, and fashioning it into something rich [and new]. This God is not finished yet. And so, I believe neither is the church." (Pg. 18) Amen