

## Sermon February 17th 2023 Rev Jo Smith

*Much of the following, and indeed our sermon series during Lent, is drawn from the book, The Provocative Church, by Graham Tomlin. SPCK 2014*

John Diamond was an English journalist who died of cancer in 2001. He wrote honestly and bravely about his battle with the disease in his regular column as well as in a book called *C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too*. Some Christians who read his work contacted him, encouraging him to seek answers to his questions, and comfort by placing his faith in Jesus. This is what he wrote about that:

*“They tell me about their spiritual product as though I might not have come across it before..as if in 47 years of living in a Christian country I might not yet have stumbled upon the concept of Christ as redeemer. ....I’m happy not believing and that’s what the evangelists don’t seem to understand.”*

I am sure that there are a lot of people in our culture who are just like John Diamond. Not hostile to or ignorant of Christianity, and often quite willing to engage with questions of spirituality, mortality and meaning. Nevertheless, the church is not where they are going to go to ask those questions and to seek answers. The message of the church has become part of the background noise of their lives, something they can hear but which fails to offer them anything they think is worthwhile, certainly nothing which captures their attention or imagination. Perhaps the message of the church has become just like Muzak to their ears.

Churches, who are facing declining numbers, at least in the Western world, are working very hard to connect with those on the edges of the church, who show some interest in finding out more about Christianity. Offering courses, like Alpha, has proved successful in some instances but there is still the fact that a very large number of people are not going to come along

to try out our courses, no matter how good they are, because they don't think that we have got anything to say that will make a real difference in their lives.

What might provoke them to think that we've got anything worth listening to? Something better than muzak?

Take heart....I've got more encouraging things to say. First of all, people haven't stopped asking the big questions about purpose, meaning and faith. Despite the impression that the world is becoming more and more secular, interest in spirituality and the spiritual quest for answers to life's inevitable griefs and challenges is still strong and possibly even on the increase. Sales of books, hits on websites about New age spiritual practices or therapies, meditation, and the like demonstrate that people are seeking something. Recent work in the fields like positive psychology and social science has also shown that faith and spiritual practices have a very positive impact on our wellbeing as individuals and communities. So people are not all as committed to a strictly secular, atheistic worldview as we are sometimes led to believe.

So if there is yearning, this desire, this turning towards spirituality in the culture, why are we not seeing more people come to church?

Well, one of the reasons is related to what I said 30 seconds ago about the book shops and websites and conferences and classes that are out there .....there are a lot of new players on the field. People can and do shop around for their spiritual fix. We do not have a monopoly now when it comes to offering answers to life's big questions, or even a sense of community and purpose. Plenty of options are out there. And we need to face that.

Who remembers Kodak? Who remembers taking photos with Kodak film? Does anyone know what happened to the Kodak company in 2012? Who still takes photos with film cameras?

Pastor and Blogger Carey Nieuwhof compares Kodak and the church. He suggests that Kodak made a fundamental mistake in understanding their company's mission.

"In many ways," He writes, "Kodak sabotaged its future by refusing to respond to the massive changes in culture.

Kodak bet too much of its future on the past (film photography). It lost."

He goes on:

"Imagine what might have happened if someone at Kodak had asked:

Are we in the film business, or the photography business? Do we manufacture and market film or do we create products that help people capture images?

If Kodak was in the film business, the future would be dim. And it was.

But if Kodak had decided it was in the photography business, if it had decided that it was in the business of images, photography....the future could have been very different.

Instead, Facebook decided it was in the photography business when it bought Instagram and facilitated people to share images to a huge audience. And Apple decided it was in the photography business when it developed the iPhone and put a high quality camera in everyone's pocket.

So I think the church, to avoid the same fate as Kodak, must absolutely clarify for itself the business it is in, and not mistake our current

methods for the mission. Method is what we do. Mission is why we exist. Methods will inevitably change over time....mission can be timeless.

Our mission, which is really God's mission, is to reconcile the whole of creation, everyone and everything to God, through Christ. That is the business we are in. That is timeless. 50 years ago youth groups and Sunday schools were an effective method to achieve the mission but they aren't so effective now. They have gone the way of camera film. Some film enthusiasts are keeping it alive, and there are some thriving youth groups but they are not ubiquitous as they once were and it's no use wishing that were so. We have to remember we are not in the business of youth clubs. We are in the business of building the kingdom. As long as we keep that in mind we can adapt our methods, what we do, to suit the current moment.

Ok it is true that these spiritual seekers are not flocking to Christian churches, that our current methods may not be working but there is some evidence that many of them have tried church, wandered in, sent their children to a Christian school, or checked out our websites or facebook posts, at some time or other....

One such person was Derek Draper a high flying political lobbyist from London whose life unravelled spectacularly as a result of his drug taking, partying and a political scandal. His therapist, treating him for the subsequent depression recommended he seek some form of spirituality to balance his life so he tried, Buddhism, yoga, various new age practices but he found they all lacked something.

He then had a powerful experience while visiting Westminster Abbey and subsequently accepted an invitation to attend his local Anglican church. This is what he has to say about what happened next for him.

I started to discover Jesus Christ, his life and teachings. I'm still learning about the liturgy, and there's no doubt that as I read I struggle with aspects

of the Bible and with the actions, past and present of the organized church, What I know though, is that none of that matters too much. The core of my Christianity is my belief in the wisdom of Jesus' words as told in the Gospels. I'm going to try to live my life according to what Jesus laid down 2000 years ago. I used to live a shallow, materialistic life. I was impatient and intolerant. There is no other way of putting it, "God is Love," says the Bible and that is what I bear in mind now - love for everyone I meet, unconditional, patient and kind.

Well we can say many things about this account.....firstly that Draper was drawn to the spiritual quest by a crisis. Its a fairly typical prodigal son story in many ways and I have known several people come to faith through moments of crisis and grief, seeking to answer questions like why is there life at all, what does it mean? How are we to live well in the midst of evil and tragedy and our own weakness?

But I also know that a crisis itself won't inevitably lead someone to God. The question is how can we as Christians offer something that will answer the questions that are being asked, rather than the ones we like answering.

I notice the word that Draper used to describe what appealed to him about Jesus - the practical wisdom.

He didn't come asking the questions, "where can I find forgiveness for my sins?" or "How can I be assured of eternal life?" "is all of this logically coherent, is it true"

In that first moment he was looking quite simply for a better and less superficial way of life. The prospect of a life governed by the priority of love, seemed better, richer and more fulfilling than anything he had found elsewhere. He was looking for meaning, purpose, a way of life not a doctrine. And when he turned up at a church he found a community that seemed to have that which he was seeking. He encountered a community that awakened his desire for God.

You know, we worry so much about having the right words to say to our friends and neighbours who aren't yet Christians. We worry about how to persuade, to argue, to convince them that what we say about Jesus is true.

We worry about having the conversation because we think we don't know enough, that we won't be able to answer the tricky questions. And yet, even if we could, it would probably be a waste of time unless they are first of all provoked to think that we have something that is worth having. Until they do, our message will continue to be Muzak to the ears. Just part of the background noise of the culture. One competing message amongst many

So this is where we come to our second reading for today.

At the end of Acts 2 we discover that the new Christians were “having favor with all the people.” This was possible because they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayer, and the breaking of bread were together and had all things in common, selling all that they had and giving to any who had need and assembling in the Temple together daily, eating in each others’ houses, receiving their food with glad and generous hearts, and praising God. The people around them saw the great transformation in these Christians and they were respected and appreciated for it. Granted, it would not be long before the religious authorities would begin to persecute the Christians because they could not agree with their doctrine, yet the Christians here have favor among the people. It was their way of life, what they did together as the body of Christ, the transformation, that was admired.

The people did not all agree with them on religious matters, as it turns out but they did recognize the positive transformative benefit of living by their convictions. And this is what living by their convictions looked like. Those first Christians were keeping the business of the church pretty simple. The business of the church was they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayer, and the breaking of bread being together, sharing their resources, sacrificially ensuring that the needs of others were met practising hospitality, practising gratitude, and praising God

Their life together impressed people and I am certain it made people ask what it was about those people that had transformed them so profoundly. A community of people who learned to place love, compassion, gratitude, hospitality, prayer, GOD, at the centre of life made people think. And it still will today. Unless there is something about us that intrigues, provokes or entices people, then our message about Jesus will simply be muzak to their ears. The quality of our life together as a church matters. We should ask ourselves what it is about our church life and worship that would make people want to know more, to want what we have? That our message might be worth listening to? That is my prayer for us...that we too will be a church that lives life in the kingdom of God and that people will be provoked to ask what it is about us that is different? That God will use us to awaken the desire for him in others.

Then....only then can we worry about how we convey our message.