

Blockbusters

Trinity 16 – Sunday 11th September 2016

BLOCKBUSTERS

How many of you can remember Blockbusters?

For years, it was on every high street, renting us films to watch at home.

As technology changed, so did Blockbusters, replacing VHS cassettes (who can remember those!?) with DVD's.

But then came the Internet – and people started to watch films in an entirely new way, by downloading and watching films online.

Blockbusters responded in a variety of ways; longer rentals, extended opening hours, special offers and discounts.

But Blockbusters went bust.

And now there is not one left.

And that's because they made a fatal mistake – they failed to understand the nature of the change that had taken place. The world had changed in a fundamental way. It was not enough to tinker with the business model but do essentially the same thing – an entirely new model was needed.

And who now misses them anyway?

THAT WAS THE CHURCH THAT WAS

The Church is in a rather similar position.

Or at least, that's the theory of a new book called *'That was the Church that was: How the Church of England lost the English people'*.

It's a book full of gossip, rumour and slanderous stories – so much so that the first print run has to be pulped!

But beneath the rubbish and lies is, I think, a powerful analysis that has more than an element of truth.

Like Blockbusters, the Church of England is, in many places, just tinkering around at the edges.

And failing to address the deep and fundamental shifts in society, or to make the changes necessary to enable it survive as more than a sect, serving a niche rather than a nation.

It is into this bigger picture of social change and the response that is so desperately needed, that I wish to place my views about the future of our Church Hall – a subject which is dear to the hearts of many of you, and which I have spent a great deal of time on since my arrival here – but first I want you to know how I have come to some key decisions.

REFRAMING THE QUESTION

In John's Gospel the scribes and Pharisees present Jesus with an issue – a woman caught in the act of adultery – and in a hostile tone they ask him a question – *'Now what do you say?'* The question is an impossible one. Jesus has been preaching about the love and mercy of God – but the Law is very clear on the penalty for adultery – this woman must be stoned to death.

But then Jesus does a very strange thing, he bends down and writes in the dust.

What was he up to? People have wondered for centuries what he was writing – but I don't think that matters. What Jesus was doing, was listening, thinking, waiting and praying.

But then, having given himself, and everyone else, time and space, he stands up and says:

'Let him who is without sin case the first stone.'

It is a statement so completely unexpected, so entirely surprising, that they do not know what to say, and one by one they walk away.

What Jesus does is ask an entirely different question and reframe the situation by standing outside the narrow range of questions and the limited framework he is given. He realises that the woman and her adultery is not the real issue – their anger at this woman is just a proxy for their own unease about Jesus and the things he is doing.

And so Our Lord approaches the subject from a new angle and a bigger perspective – one in which God is at the centre.

A NEW VISION

Today is the start of a similar process for us as we begin to form a new vision for this parish and how it uses its resources for the glory of God and expression of the love of Christ.

Each one of you has been given today a ‘St Michael’s Vision’ card, and I want you to share with me and the PCC, your vision and ideas for St Michael’s over the next 10 years.

- Whose needs are not being met in our community?
- What should our priorities be?
- Where do you see the Holy Spirit leading us to focus our resources?

Nothing is too absurd or too big (or too small), nothing is too imaginative or hopeful – God desires the very best, he wants us to aim high.

Because whatever the book *‘That was the Church that was’* may say, in the midst of a general failure to grasp the extent of change and the necessary response, there are many churches that have risen to the task, and are conspicuously successful in doing so. They are churches of every tradition and style, but what connects them is that they have thought deeply and prayerfully about the focus and direction of their ministry, what God is calling them to at this time and in the future.

Let me give you some examples of the sort of things I mean:

One parish I know in this diocese is about to build a number of flats to house a new monastic community, along the lines of the St Anselm Community at Lambeth Palace, in order to bring a dead parish back to life.

Another has identified a need for a ministry to students in its local area, and has found the resources to employ a priest specifically for the purpose of starting a new evening congregation for young adults.

Another church near to here is drawing up plans for a 4 million pound, multi-phase project in which they will completely reorder the interior of their church, build a welcome centre on the front, and completely rebuild their church hall as a state of the art and up to date facility for the local community.

And another in north London, which you might have seen in the news this week, is becoming a venue for live music – though the Vicar (a personal friend of mine) assures me and the congregation that ‘there *will be no mosh pits!*’

I hasten to add that none of these projects are suitable for us at St Michael’s, because they are detailed responses to local need – but what is? Like them we need to identify our priorities, and shape our ministry and channel our resources towards them.

It is clear to me that our own hall is something of a ‘Blockbuster’. The needs for which it was built are no longer our needs as a church. The world has changed and we need to do something different. The site must be redeveloped for the radically altered situation of ministry in the 21st century – and a brand new, exciting and contemporary facility in a mixed development will enable us to do exactly that.

But the Church Hall does not stand in isolation from the rest of vision of the parish. Our current plans need to be reframed within a larger vision, and it is this which larger overall vision that I want your help with. Then with your input, at the upcoming PCC Conference later this month, we will begin shaping that vision by identifying priorities and the resources we need to achieve them.

I encourage you, do not return your card today (unless you feel particularly inspired by the Holy Spirit!), I want you to take it home and pray about it – but return it before the 24th September.

LOST SHEEP AND LOST COIN

And if we needed a model of how to go forward, then God has provided the pattern in the Gospel today.

The parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are about God’s restless and extravagant care for every person.

But they are also about how we must go in search of what is important, and working with energy and purpose towards a goal.

The shepherd who will not give up until the single sheep is found.

The woman who searches and searches until the coin has been recovered.

And in both cases, did you hear what was the result?

JOY.

Rejoice! – for what was lost is found.

Our job now as a church is to identify what it is that we are missing, what is lacking, what needs to be found, so that we can work towards finding it, and rejoicing with God in His ministry to every person.

For St Michael's won't be a Church that *was*, but a church that ***is*** and ***will be***.

Not a church that loses or is lost – but a church that searches and finds.

Fr Stephen Stavrou