



**St. Philip Anglican Church**

A Spacious Place of Welcome

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 26 February 2023, Lent 1

Rt Rev Anna Greenwood-Lee

Starts: 30:12

<https://youtu.be/DapOG21Ufqk?t=1812>

Good morning.

Apart from serving as a bishop, I also serve as a soccer mother. Yesterday was a very cold day to be a soccer mother, and sometimes other parents ask me at soccer what I do for a living. And my children tell me I should lie - so sometimes I just say well I work for the church, and then if they don't ask any more questions, I leave it at that. But sometimes they get it out of me that I'm a bishop, and, you know, people's faces do all sorts of contractions and they wonder what I'm talking about.

So to be a bishop is to have what we call episcopal ministry. This is not what I tell people in soccer, don't worry, but I'll tell you: *episcopal* comes from the Latin word for oversight, and so to be a bishop is to have a ministry of oversight. So while Peter is here on the ground with you all, if that makes sense, choosing hymns and setting things up and running the day-to-day stuff in the parish, a bishop has a ministry of oversight, and so you're supposed to be kind of floating a little bit higher, and looking not just at one parish but at the system as a whole. And so it's my role in this kind of system that is the Anglican Diocese of the Islands and Inlets that makes up 46 parishes, eight housing societies, 26 cemeteries - never take a job with cemeteries, trust me - and a school, it's my job to kind of oversee the beautiful and dynamic and sometimes messy and complicated thing that is this diocese.

And there's a book I keep coming back to since I took on this job which is called *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Has anyone read this book? It's not a new book; it's by a man called Ron Heifetz, and I just have to keep coming back to it in this crazy job of being a bishop: *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Ron Heifetz is known for his work in management, talking about how there's two different kinds of problems.

He says there's technical problems and there's adaptive problems. So technical problems we have all the time, when we can't get our phones to work or we can't get the TV to turn on, or we can't figure out - sometimes technical problems are

really very complicated, right - we can't figure out how to land an airplane in a storm, or launch a rocket. But technical problems are problems for which there's technical solutions, and for which there's experts in the field, and for which there are best practices, that if you replicate and do another time, you can probably have much more success of solving this technical problem.

Adaptive problems are problems where technical solutions might *help* with the problem, but they're never going to entirely solve it. Raising children is an adaptive problem, right - you can read all the books that you like, you may even have done it before, quite successfully, with a number of children: it makes you no expert whatsoever in whatever child of God has now come amongst you. It's an adaptive problem. Being married is an adaptive problem - does anybody know this, right? - there are no technical solutions as to how to have a good marriage. And being church is an adaptive problem. Anything really life-giving is actually an adaptive, not a technical, problem. But we really would like things to be technical problems! Whenever we're faced with a challenge, our kind of go-to is to find a technical solution.

Take climate change, for instance. We would really like it if someone could come along and just invent a vacuum that sucked all the carbon out of the atmosphere, so that we could just continue on with our lives as before. That'd be great. And there's all sorts of technical solutions that are part of solving climate change - but if we think that it's only a technical problem, then it usually becomes someone else's problem to solve. And I think we're beginning to understand that climate change will only actually be addressed when everybody in the system, as Heifetz says, takes responsibility for their part of the mess.

And when everybody in the system accepts a responsibility to change - so we might have to fly less or put in heat pumps or do all sorts of things - we ourselves are going to have to adapt.

How to be Church in the 21st century is an adaptive problem. We are living in the most secular diocese in North America: do you know this? Canada is more secular than the United States: across Canada, one-third of people checked "no religion" on the 2021 census. Here in British Columbia it was 50 percent. Here in the Greater Victoria area it was 60. In Nanaimo it's 63 - so I don't know what's going on in Nanaimo - and last week I was on Galiano Island and they're like, "Bishop, it's got to be at least 80." So we don't have data for every little point, but we are, for whatever reason, the most secular diocese in North America. More and more people are checking that "no religion" box, and so how to be Church in this part of the world is an adaptive challenge. No one has ever been Church in such a secular age, in such a secular place, ever before.

So when people come and tell me, well there's this church in Texas that's doing great, I'm like, well, that's great, but that's Texas. The Diocese of the Islands and Inlets is its own place, and we are called to be God's people in this place in this

time. And yes, there are some technical solutions ,and yes, there are some things we can learn from other places, but ultimately whatever we do here is going to have to be what we do *here*, and it's going to have to involve all of us adapting. Which brings me to today's Gospel reading: can you see how they connect? No sooner than Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, and God says, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," - sounds like it's all going to go great, doesn't it? And then you turn the page, and the devil, or the adversary as some people say it might be more accurately translated, drives Jesus into the wilderness. "This is my son with whom I am well pleased," and then the devil drives him into the wilderness, and he's in the wilderness, and the devil, or the adversary, tempts him with what I would call technical solutions. Just turn the rocks into bread, right? That'd be easier than yourself becoming the bread of the world. Just somehow magically take over all the kingdoms of the world - that would be easier than step by step, and person by person, trying to build this strange and beautiful thing called the kingdom of God.

Jesus comes to challenge every single one of us to adapt, every single one of us to change, every single one of us to live in a new way. The devil tempts him with an easy out, and it's important - right from the beginning of the story of Jesus's public ministry, which is what the story of Jesus in the wilderness is, for Jesus to wrestle with that himself - No, I'm not going to take the technical way, the easy way out - and for all of us to see that Jesus isn't going to do that. If Jesus would have just been baptized in the Jordan, and then all of a sudden started doing magical technical solutions to the problems of the world, it would be a very short story, and it wouldn't require anything of us. It wouldn't require disciples and followers. It wouldn't require Christ to be crucified. It would have been easy and simple, and it probably wouldn't have changed the world, because it would have been outside of us.

The other temptation we have to look at when we're talking about technical versus adaptive changes, though, is the temptation to think that *someone else* needs to adapt. Anyone ever done this? Our marriage would be better if you were a better listener! It happens - this diocese would be better if we had a better Bishop. These parishes would be better if we had better priests. You know - my kid would be doing better in school if it was a better teacher. We all do this, we point at, we kind of sense that it's an adaptive problem, not a technical one, but we really would like somebody else to adapt, not us. China really has to lower their climate change emissions so that we can stay the same.

Jesus is also wise to this one. All through the scripture Jesus is calling each and every single one of us to change. Nobody gets off scot-free in the gospel. Everybody has a different piece of work to do, but everyone has a part to do. So I'm here today, just a few weeks before you're welcoming your lovely new priest Allen. It's taken us a while to get a new priest for you, hasn't it? Bless Peter,

I took Peter out to lunch and tried to talk him into this job. Like all good prophets, Peter told me no thank you. Peter told me, "I'm old." Peter told me, "I have other plans, Bishop," and I said, "Well maybe you only have to do it till September," - and here we are - but good things come to those who wait, and we have a very wise and a very experienced and a very good priest in Allen who's coming [to be] with you.

But as you walk these next stage of your journey as a parish with Allen, be careful you're not tempted with Allen to look for technical solutions. Be careful you're not tempted to think that if you just had a better website, or a better music program, or change the service time, or remove the pews, then all of a sudden everything was going to be easy. Know that when we're tempted to look for technical solutions, we're usually avoiding doing our own adaptive work. We're usually avoiding looking at how we might be called to change how God is doing a new thing in our midst, and we might be called to get on board.

I go all around the diocese preaching, and pretty much every sermon goes something like this: the future is not going to look like the past; the future is not going to look like the past. So how does that feel to you this morning? Are you sad? Are you curious? Are you excited? Tell me, just popcorn it up here – curious, excited, challenged. Come on, you're all behind masks, I won't remember anyway. Pardon? - suspicious. I like the honesty! Thank you. Excited. Asleep!

So if we think about it, God's message to us has always been that the future is not going to look like the past. I've done my best to look for a Bible story where God comes to a people and says, stay as you are, nothing's going to change, I'll make this easy for you. Is there a Bible story like that? I'm going to raise up a new leader for you who looks exactly like the last leader. Don't panic. There's no story like that! But we're always, always hoping for one.

God's always coming to us and saying the future is not going to look like the past, and the future is bright. And God is always moving into the future quicker than we're going with God. God's always 10 steps ahead of us, and we're like yeah, but we kind of like the past. God turns people who look to the past into pillars of salt, and does all sorts of things to remind us that we're supposed to be following God into a new future. But it's hard for us. Whether 'the future is not going to look like the past' sounds like good news to you or bad news to you kind of depends what the past has looked like for you.

If you were a slave in Egypt, and God comes to you and says the future is not going to look like the past you're like, "Woohoo!" But if you're a priest in David's kingdom, enjoying a privileged position, and God comes to you and says the future is not going to look like the past, you're like, No thank you. If you're the

poor and God comes to you and says the future is not going to look like the past, that's great news, but if you're the rich and God says to you the future is not going to look like the past, then you're afraid of being turned empty away. So we need to be careful when we think about this - the future is not going to look like the past - about situating ourselves with honesty in that. If we really like the past, it's really hard when someone tells you the future is not going to look like the past. But that doesn't mean that the future is not bright, that God's not with us in that new and emerging future. But it's often hard work to follow God into an unknown future, isn't it? I will admit that.

So my message for you this morning, Saint Philip's: the future is not going to look like the past, and the future is bright.

But if you get into your head to write the bishop an email or send the bishop a letter and tell me that the new priest does not look like the old priest, and the future that you are having is not looking like the past you really enjoyed - be warned that I'm going to write back and ask you if you are taking responsibility for your part of the mess, and if you are willing to follow a known God into an unknown future. Got it? That's our deal.

I get a lot of mail; I get a lot of helpful suggestions of technical solutions that involve no transformation whatsoever on my part, but somebody else in the system doing all sorts of things to make life easier for me. And that is not the Christian life. A Christian life always involves each and every one of us being open to God's spirit, being open to transformation, being open to the new thing that God is doing in our midst. And God is doing a new thing in our midst, of that I am sure. Something new and exciting is bubbling up in our midst that might look like Bonhoeffer's *Religionless Christianity* - did any of you read that book? There's a whole thesis out there that we weren't supposed to be religious anyway, we were just supposed to be followers of Christ. So when people are ticking that "no religion" box on the census, maybe they're telling us what part of our religion we need to let go of so that we can truly be followers of Christ.

The fact that we live in the most secular diocese in North America is not a problem to be solved: it's an opportunity to be embraced. God is with us in this and helping us to create a new thing, a new way of being Church, but we're going to have to be brave, we're going to have to be adaptive, and we're going to have to try some things. We're going to have to fall down and get back up again, and we're going to have to wrestle with each other and with God and with the Spirit, and we're going to have to trust that the one God of all time, in all space, who is always and everywhere making all things new, is with us today, here in this place. And so, good people of St Philip's, the future is not going to look like the past, and the future is bright.

Amen.

