

Here we are in week two of our thinking about Path of renewal and today I want to think about the challenges of the journey. As we journey with God we will face challenges and there will be things we don't understand, or don't agree with.

Before getting into the meat of today I want to spend a few moments thinking about the idea of being blessed by God. Last week we read in Genesis 12 where God chose Abraham and told him to go with his family to a land God would show him and in doing so he would be blessed. Eventually, Israel understood themselves as a people who are blessed as a result of the promises given by God to Abraham, and renewed to Isaac and Jacob. Their continuation was that God had kept his word to Abraham.

Blessing was dependent on a continuing relationship with God, so there are two aspects to this. One is the promise to Abraham of blessing and becoming a great nation and having a descendent who will bless 'all people on earth'. That's the long term promise of blessing to Abraham and his descendants. What we also learn is that blessing is expressed in material terms – fertility, prosperity, peace, victory etc – it was always as a result of remaining in relationship with God. The ultimate blessing is not the material benefit but the relationship itself.

So, when we come to this story today we need to keep that in mind. Child sacrifice was known in the culture of the Middle East. It was thought that if your god provided fertility he or she was entitled to demand a portion of what had been produced – whether it be grain, animals or children. This story suggests that Abraham was not surprised by God's demand and Hebrews 11 tells us why: *Hebrews 11:17-19* *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*

Abraham knew that God would keep his promise – he had already experienced the miracle of having a child with Sarah. God didn't need to test Abraham to know what his faith was like – so could this test have been for Abraham's sake, to give him that moment to look back on in years to come as his family is being built and trials come. What does it say to Sarah and other household members, as well as to future generations. People look at it negatively now as child abuse, but in that time, with the future they had been promised, here is a situation to look back at as a reminder that blessing is about relationship with God and although he sometimes asks for your very future, all your hopes and dreams, the most precious thing you have, when you respond in faith he will bless in ways you can't even imagine. It shows a father willing to sacrifice his son and introduces the concept of substitutionary atonement through sacrifice – in other words it points to Jesus, who died on our behalf.

Where does that leave us today? We know that our culture is changing rapidly and the church is in a state of decline. In many ways, what the church is going through is reflected in other industries like what's been happening in the newspaper and photography businesses.

Some companies have sabotaged their own future by confusing the issues they were facing. Others have adopted and thrived.

Four years ago, the company that was synonymous with photography declared bankruptcy as Kodak went under, having failed to effectively respond to digital photography.

In many ways, 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.

Newspapers are also facing epic struggles, with papers shutting down and even iconic newspapers like the Independent struggling to stay afloat, but moving online.

While the jury is still out on how the news industry will look in five years, the issues are not that different from what the photography industry faced or what the church is facing.

In each case, the risk of self-sabotage by established organizations is huge and the church is not exempt.

What I see happening in Kodak and in some newspapers is something I also see among churches.

Here are three ways congregations struggle to change so that they can continue on the journey God has sent them on and receive his blessing.

1. Confusing the method with the mission

Too many people mix up method and mission. That's one of the things that happened to Kodak and that's happening in journalism. It's also an epidemic in the church world, and it's an incredibly easy mistake to make.

A method is a current approach that helps you accomplish the mission. It's how you do what you do.

The mission is why you exist.

The problem in most churches is people (including leaders) get very fond of their methods. You get rewarded for great methods...like the kind of church service you offer, or the activities your church does, or whatever else you've become good at. People come because they appreciate what you do.

For almost a century, nobody was better at film photography than Kodak.

Chances are that you are here for a couple of reasons: this is your church and we haven't done anything outrageous enough to make you leave, even if you're not totally into the way we do things; or, because you value what we do and want more. Otherwise you probably wouldn't be here for the long term.

Which is also why its so difficult to change. Whenever I try something new I know there will be ‘weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth’. But it’s also true of the wider church – I hear the same things from other colleagues. And ministers are guilty of it too - that’s because when we confuse the method with the mission, we see the method as most important. Not the mission.

And sometimes, because your methods have made you successful, you come to see them as sacred and are reluctant to change.

But methods are never sacred. Particularly in church. The mission—and only the mission—is sacred. When you refuse to change the method, you eventually kill the mission. Just ask Kodak.

Abraham was well aware what his mission was – it was to be obedient to God. It wasn’t about making disciples, or building churches – it was simply about obeying God. He knew the blessing God had promised and he had already learnt the hard way that God would act in his time, and that he and Sarah couldn’t hurry it along themselves. God had provided a child, even although it seemed impossible. Abraham had already confused the method with the mission by having a child with his servant – it wasn’t just having a child that was important. The mission was to be obedient and see God building a nation through Abraham by which all nations would be blessed.

What is our mission? Well, it’s to go and make disciples, just as Jesus told his disciples all those years ago – we put that like this: Connecting with God, each other, and the world.

2. Failure to clarify what the real mission is

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

Are we in the film business, or the photography business?

Kodak focussed on the film business, and the future was be dim. But if Kodak has decided it was in the photography business, the future could have been very different.

Instead, Facebook decided it was in the photography business when it bought Instagram. And Apple decided it was in the photography business when it developed the iPhone.

If you were in the newspaper business today, a great question to ask is this: Are we in the newspaper business, or the news business? That’s why the Independent is going digital, because it’s in the news business.

Again, the future changes when you start asking questions that clarify the real mission. What if Abraham had said no to God? My mission now is to ignore you and protect this child at all costs. I will not do what you say.

Our mission isn’t holding services. It’s not music. It’s not even preaching. Nor is it having other groups, classes or activities. It’s not launching an online presence or doing social media well.

Or having a great young church. (Even though we want to have ALL of these and do them well.)

We can change because we're committed to doing whatever it takes to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus – to make disciples.

Our methods—the way we facilitate our services, our youth work, our programming, the way we do groups, how we serve—should support our mission.

If we don't know what our true mission is, we'll never find the right method to accomplish it.

3. Unwillingness to change methods to support the real mission

Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac because God asked him – he changed the method to support the real mission – at least at this point in the story. Later we see he puts the method first and gets it wrong with potentially disastrous results.

Far too many churches are afraid to change their methods. But once you clarify your real mission, change becomes so much easier.

Think about it. If you have a clear sense of what you are called to do, then: when you see a way to further your mission, you'll change your methods to advance your mission.

When you see a chance to reach more people, you'll change what you do to advance your mission.

And of course, when you fail at your mission, you won't stubbornly cling to ineffective methods. You'll gladly embrace new methods to advance your mission.

Once you understand your real mission, it becomes so much easier to change your methods.

Clarifying your mission can also mean your whole attitude toward change is transformed. Abraham was willing to sacrifice everything because he believed that God knew more than he did and would work out his promises.

This Path of Renewal process is about looking at our mission:

connecting with God, each other and the world

and working out how best we can do that. If it is about discipleship then connecting with God is where we start and that means each of us developing a deeper relationship with him through prayer and bible study; connecting with each other is about bringing that relationship to bear in our personal relationships, by encouraging, supporting and building each other up, and developing deeper relationships with each other. That's why we do dinner for 6, home groups, tea and coffee after the service, and other social activities – to provide opportunities to connect with each other; connecting with the world is about developing deeper relationships with people

around us at home, work and wherever we find ourselves often – relationship which leads to invitation is the best way of introducing people to Jesus and getting them to church.

Here are some things churches have done for generations which no longer work:

1. Relying on an automatic return to church

There was a day when you could fairly safely assume that once young adults got married and had a child, they would automatically come back to church.

Those days are gone or largely gone. The average unchurched person doesn't think about going to church any more than the average Christian thinks about going to synagogue. It just doesn't cross their mind.

2. Appealing to people out of guilt or obligation

The number of people who feel guilty about not being in church on Sunday shrinks daily.

Ditto with the number of people who will serve at a church because they feel they should.

Interestingly enough, Jesus never appealed to people out of guilt or obligation. He invited people.

The future church will as well.

3. Simply being better than other churches

When people went to church, being a better church than other churches got you mileage.

Most people no longer go to church.

Saying “we have a better church” is kind of like saying “we have better, organic, locally grown watercress” at a BBQ.

Most people just aren't going to buy.

The church is an alternative. And an alternative, clearly and effectively presented, will do far better than simply saying we're better than something you weren't interested in in the first place.

4. A self-centred mission

You have to be careful not to make the mission about your church. Over time, it's easy to become self-centred. When we have to focus on our income, or our buildings or our falling rolls it's easy to become self-centred.

The people we're trying to reach aren't interested in our church. What they're interested in (whether they realize it or not) is Jesus. And his mission.

The true mission isn't about our church. It's about Jesus and THE church. THAT resonates.

5. Assuming people know what their next step is

Decades ago, in a more church-ed culture, it was commonplace to assume that most people knew what they needed to do to become a Christian or to grow as a Christian.

That era is gone.

Now the average unchurched person arrives knowing almost nothing about Christianity, what to do to become a Christian or how to grow as a Christian.

To understand how radically things have shifted, imagine you converted to Hinduism.

How would you know you've actually become a Hindu?

What's your next step?

Just remember that the next time a completely unchurched person begins to attend your church. That's assuming there is a next time, of course.

The Future is At Stake

So can you just ignore all of this and hope it goes away? Well, that's kind of what Kodak did.

And just realise...when you become more wedded to the methods than the mission, the church dies. The church of God has a better mission than any other organization on the planet.

The challenge for us in this generation is to keep the methods fluid and the mission sacred. The more we do that, the more effective we'll be.