re-orientation, in adopting God's new mission for his life and living out God's call for him. Rather than pursuing his own mission, he re-oriented himself to God's mission.

What is our call, our vocation, in this strange new landscape that we find ourselves? How can we make sense of it? Like Paul, we have to accept that God is somehow in this strange new landscape, this experience that we find so disorientating. What is he calling us to? In his ongoing revelation, what new perspective and insights does he have for us? How can we use the gifts that he has given us (individually and collectively) to join in his mission?

The Ministry and Mission Overview (MMO) is Grafton Diocese's way of somehow getting our heads around this new landscape. It has already challenged us to look at new ways of being the church. This will involve much consultation over the coming months as we look at more specific plans, but let's approach all of this with an openness to God's call.

Gracious God, give us wisdom to perceive you, intellect to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you and a life to proclaim you, through the power of the spirit of the Lord Jesus. Amen. (*St Benedict*)

MA Harvey 7.vi. 2019

## Notes.

- 1. Walt Disney Pictures, 2018
- 2. Turning Turtle Song from Mary Poppins Returns
- 3. mccrindle.com.au, 2013
- 4. YouGov 2018



## Sermon for Synod Eucharist

Christ Church Cathedral, Grafton, 21 June 2019 The Rt. Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey

The latest version of the popular film *Mary Poppins* is entitled *Mary Poppins Returns.*<sup>1</sup> The Banks family is in financial trouble. The children, Annabel and John, decide to help out by selling a precious family heirloom, a Royal Doulton bowl belonging to their mother. However, the bowl becomes accidentally broken. So Mary Poppins and the children visit her cousin, Topsy, who repairs such things.

As they open the door to Topsy's place, the house turns around and around until they all find themselves seated on the ceiling. In a song, Topsy decares herself unable to function, let alone to help fix their precious bowl. As we might guess from her name (Topsy), this is a regular occurrence at Topsy's house. Every second Wednesday, from 9am until noon, Topsy's life turns upside down: she doesn't know "her up from her down, her east from her west, her topsy from her bottomsy!" She sings:

Fast is slow, low is high, stop is go and that is why Every second Wednesday is a hurdle From 8 to 9. all is well

Then I roll over on my shell And all because the world is turning turtle.

Day is night, dog is cat, black is white, thin is fat

That is why I'm loosening up my girdle I cannot help this charming troop Don't mock me, 'cause I'm in the soup And why? Because the world is turning turtle

*Oh, woe is me, I'm as opposite as I can be I long for Thursdays when the world is drab.*<sup>2</sup>

As I reflect on Topsy's experience, I think it is remarkably similar to our own experience of being the church in a post-Christendom world. Our Anglican Church institution, our structures, our processes, our way of being present in communities, doesn't seem to make sense any more. Some things that worked for generations, aren't working so well. Through our institutional church eyes, we are having trouble perceiving the world around us. Perhaps some examples might help illustrate my point, remembering that the news isn't all bad, it's just difficult to make sense of.

Even if we do well at attracting newcomers and including them in the life of our local



church community: the rosters may still have lots of gaps because the new people have a different view of the church, of commitment and belonging.

Maybe we've got 400 hundred Facebook followers, but only 25 people in church on Sunday!

Other things are topsy turvy too. Together with lower levels of trust in institutions generally, statistics show that society's level of trust in the church has dropped, yet independent schools, most of which (over 80%) are run by the mainline churches, have strong and ever-increasing enrolments, and healthy levels of parental confidence.

We have some lovely church buildings scattered all over the country, yet many of these are out of step with what younger generations are looking for in a gathering space for worship, learning or socialising.

Even if we set the buildings to one side, attitudes are hard to make sense of. In a recent survey<sup>3</sup> of attitudes, non-church attenders were asked why they don't attend church? 47% said because it was irrelevant to their lives. Fair enough. But in the same survey, respondents were also asked: are churches beneficial in my neighbourhood? 88% said yes! This is good news, but what does it mean?

In another survey<sup>4</sup>, of the 19% of people who said they don't believe in God, half of them said they do believe in "a universal spirit or power behind the universe" What is this statistic? Where did that come from? What does it mean?

I could go on with more illustrations but I think you know what I mean: our Anglican mindset has its roots firmly in an era when society was a very different place. But this Christendom model, as a way of understanding the world, has long since faded into the sunset. As a church, we are faithfully trying to see how our established way of being can fit into a society that has undergone seismic shifts over the last few



decades. There are glimmers of hope, as the statistics suggest, but what on earth do they mean and how can we make sense of them?

I wonder, what does this mean for you, and for your church community? How have these seismic changes affected you? Maybe, like me, you feel like Topsy and the children: our world has turned upside down and we're struggling to find our perspective. While we're disoriented, we can't properly get our bearings or function effectively.

In our scripture readings tonight, we hear of Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). Tonight we heard the first account of this event, but there are two other accounts, later in Acts (22:3-21; 26:2-23). While he sought letters from the religious authorities to enable him to persecute, it's clear that the initiative was Saul's - the motivation for this mission stemming from his own deep passion and hatred. By his own later admission, he saw this as **his mission** (22:4-5; 26:9-12).

To say that this encounter on the Road to Damascus disoriented Paul or Saul, is an understatement. He fell to the ground (9:4), couldn't see (9:9), he needed to be led (9:8; 22:11) and for three days neither ate nor drank (9:9). Ananias ministered to him and restored his sight (9:10-19).

Like Topsy's world, Saul's world was turned upside down and he lost all perspective. It was a disorienting experience, but one that led to the finding of a new perspective and a new way of understanding the world and of his place in it. It was no longer to be his own mission of hate, but **God's mission** of love. Initially he was not able to make sense of this Damascus Road experience, but as he reflected on it he began to use words that reveal that he eventually saw it in vocational terms. It was not only a conversion to the way of Christ, but *a call to participate in God's mission*. In Paul's case, this involved a specific task: an apostleship to the gentiles. Paul later described it as an act of God's grace (1 Cor 15:1-11).

Predictably, in the *Mary Poppins Returns* movie, Mary Poppins is having nothing of this disorientation! Her advice to Topsy is that if life insists on turning everything upside down, then she should stand on her head and adopt a new perspective. As Mary Poppins says,

When you change the view from where you stood; The things you view will change for good

With this change of perspective, everything makes sense, Topsy is able to function again, and the family heirloom bowl is fixed, to the great relief of the children. "I never thought of things that way" (sings Topsy) "now Wednesdays are my favourite day!" From what perspective should we look at things? Paul found his new perspective, his