

A Vision FOR US

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Date: 19 November 2016

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[0 : 0 0] On September 11, 2001, the world as we know it in the West changed. When those two towers came down in New York, the secular West started talking about religion as a source of evil.

Plenty of people started to echo the mantra of the new atheist movement, that is, religion poisons everything. And it wasn't just extremist Muslims in their sights.

Christianity, too, has become more and more isolated over the decades because, in fact, of decades, if not centuries of abuse of power, which has led to many, many vulnerable lives being damaged.

And our society is rightly angered by such abuse. Fifteen years later, in Christianity, and church leaders, once highly regarded in our society, are no longer trusted or regarded.

The church has an institution is seen as a drain on society. It's an institution which is connected to the dark ages with many dark secrets. And Christians themselves find it harder and harder to talk about God or sex or politics.

[1 : 1 3] The pressure is to keep your beliefs, whatever they are, private, silent for you back in the home. And yet, into this pluralistic, post-Christian space, we have the commands of Jesus.

The great commission that he gave his disciples, gave it to us in Matthew 28. Sam just read out to us, And it's passages like that stand behind our vision statement that we are desperate, Sorry, we united in our desperation for the world around us to encounter Jesus and our desire to represent the diversity of Chatswood.

Sam has said it already. It's Vision Sunday today. It's our final day on this new vision statement for now. We'll hear a lot more about it in the coming weeks and months and years.

But my focus today is the same as last week. And it's on that part of the vision statement which says, We are desperate for the world around us to encounter Jesus.

Why does the world around us need to encounter Jesus? And it's because of the extraordinary claim that we looked at last week in 2 Corinthians 5. We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died, and he died for all.

[2 : 5 1] Jesus' death, his resurrection, universal significance, it crosses all generations, all cultures, all peoples. And Jesus claimed it himself in John 14, 6, I am the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.

And here again, we see it again in Acts 4, 12, when referring to Jesus as salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved.

That's why we have this vision statement. Peter is before a court, is in front of the Jewish leaders of his day. He isn't just saying that these Jewish leaders that he's speaking to need to acknowledge their Messiah, their Savior.

He says there is no other name under heaven given to people by which they must be saved. There is no other alternative. There's no other name.

There's no other Savior. There's no other religion. There's no other truth. That is an exclusive claim. And exclusive claims are a very, very real problem in a pluralistic society.

[4 : 17] And so we have a problem. For some elements in our society, our vision statement is dangerous.

And is the reason, they would say, that there is so much abuse and division in our history. And so with this vision before us, let's see what we can learn from the earliest church.

It should be noted that church was in fact born into a pluralistic society. There were lots of different cultures and gods.

And even though that was the case right from the very beginning of Christianity, they made universal claims. Claims to absolute truth.

And not surprisingly, it got Jesus persecuted, crucified, and the first Christian leaders and many Christians since persecuted.

[5 : 21] So let's first of all have a look at the problem with truth claims. In Acts 4, the religious heavies are responding to a sermon that's preached in Acts 3.

And in that sermon, Peter has said a bunch of things. For instance, in verse 21, he says that Jesus has gone to heaven, but will return to restore all things, everything.

And he's going to make everything right. No suffering, no death, no evil, no sorrows. And in verse 25, he says that through Jesus Christ, the whole world, all peoples will be blessed.

And so when he says in chapter 4, verse 12, that salvation is found in no other name than Jesus, it is pretty much a summary of what he's just preached in Acts 3.

Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah for the whole world. He is the universal saviour. And this pretty much annoyed everyone. This is not what the Jews were expecting.

[6 : 25] You see, for most, they were hoping that there would be a man, a Messiah who would be a great leader, who would do something about the Roman oppression. Come in and beat up the Romans for them.

They believed in a private Messiah. They believed in a Messiah for the Jews. And as you go through the book of Acts, you notice the Christians also got in trouble with the Romans.

You see, the Roman world was officially pluralistic. The Romans let everyone worship their own gods, whatever your god might be. And there was gods in every town and village and household.

So long as you also worship the emperor. And so everyone in the Roman Empire was commanded and requested and required to say, Kaiser Kurios, Caesar is Lord.

And the implication being is that if you're free to worship whatever gods you want, but you must also say Caesar is Lord. And the implication therefore is, well, you can't make an exclusive claim because you're worshipping two gods.

[7 : 36] Your god cannot be supreme over all gods. And Christians couldn't do that. All they could say is, Jesus is Lord.

And it brought them in tremendous conflict with the Romans. And in Acts 19, there is this riot in Ephesus when the preaching of the Christian gospel was undermining the temple cult.

This is the first century. Nothing much has changed. When Christians come along and say today that Jesus is the only way to be saved, Christianity is the one true religion, it is seen as incredibly exclusive, narrow-minded, arrogant, and even dangerous.

And so what are we to do with that in Chatswood? Where our neighbours are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, and now Scientologists. Do we just have to get with the times and adapt so that people don't get offended?

Why not just make love the unifying principle? Let's go back to the 1960s and just peace man everywhere. Why not just make love? Because that is in fact the popular unifying principle nowadays.

[8 : 53] Not truth, just love, whatever that means. Is the way to live in peace with all the diversity simply to affirm that all religions and ideas are equally valid?

I think not. Christianity was born into a pluralistic society. The claims of Christianity looked every bit as narrow and dangerous in the first century as it does in the 21st century. And yet, lots of people still believed then as they do now.

So let's just take a moment. I just want to pause here for a moment. When I say pause, it's going to be kind of a long pause. And to address the problems that I have with the problem of exclusive claims. I want to address the problems that our society has with the problem of exclusive claims.

The assumption seems to be that the only way to be truly inclusive is to say that all religions are equally valid. The assumption is that religion can be privately and subjectively helpful behind my closed doors, in my home.

But there is not one right way to think about God and spiritual reality. Now that is seen as inclusive and therefore appropriate. So first of all, there's the historical problem.

[10 : 09] There is pressure to do what the first Christians were pressured to do under the Roman Empire for the first three centuries. And that is, you can believe in Jesus so long as you don't say that Jesus is the best or the most superior or the only way to find God and nothing much has changed in 20 centuries of history.

The problem with that is that the Jesus we believe in historically is the Jesus who says, I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life and no one comes to the Father except through me.

That's the only Jesus we've got in history. No other religious leader ever said it. No other religious leader ever claimed to even work on the level of Jesus.

There is no way to believe in Jesus if he is just the same as all the others. Buddha never said anything like that. Confucius never said anything like that. Muhammad never said anything like that. And the dude who's in charge of the Scientology who's dead now, whatever his name was, never said anything like that.

No one ever said anything like that. And maybe Jesus is right or maybe he's wrong but he's not the same as everyone else. Either he is not the Son of God in which case he is inferior to everyone else because they at least have the common sense and humility not to make megalomaniacal claims about themselves or he is the Son of God and he is the only way and all other claims should therefore be tested against him.

[11 : 47] If he is true he is the one way. If he is not true then he is no way. He's not just a way. That's the historical.

Christianity claims that if you look at the evidence of the resurrection the brilliance of his teaching the brilliance of his character then he is superior by implication. Secondly, there's the logical problem.

How can all religions actually be equally valued? The statement can only be true if number one there is no God or number two if there is a God but that God was so disconnected so impersonal that this God did not care what you believed or what you did.

The God of Aristotle for instance. Greek philosophy. thirdly I actually think I have a problem because I think it's a hypocritical problem.

I think it's hypocritical to say to a Christian you shouldn't have that view of God all religions are valid there isn't one God. What is happening at that point is pressure for me to abandon my view of God and accept another person's view of God.

[13 : 10] It's a claim in itself which is exclusive. It's saying I'm right you're wrong my take on spirituality and God is superior to your take on spirituality and God so dump yours and believe mine.

So they're making exclusive claims as well at least I'm admitting it. If it is narrow and wrong to say that there is one true religion it is narrow and wrong to say that there is only one way to think about religion.

Everybody is making exclusive claims to say that no one should make a universal truth exclusive claim is in fact a universal claim in itself. Fourthly if truth is culturally relevant and person specific that everyone needs to decide what is wrong and wrong right and wrong for themselves that there is no moral absolutes that religion is okay in private beliefs but in fact should be kept out of the public sphere and it's wrong to persuade others to change their views then it leads to being helpless in the face of injustice.

If there is no absolute truth and morality is relative then you can never say to another individual to another company to another country that they are in fact being immoral and just.

You might have moral feelings but without God there are no moral obligations. Moral feelings is when I say I feel that that's wrong.

[14 : 48] Moral obligation is you got to stop doing that because it is wrong. you can't do anything therefore about greed you can't do anything about materialism you can't do anything about genocide you can't do anything about slavery you can't do anything about injustice you can't do anything about refugees.

If people finally come to realise that then the real question is how is it possible for us to live together in peace? how can we have a pluralistic society and a world in which people deeply differ in their beliefs and able to live together and respect each other and work together and be civil and the way to get to that point is not for some small minority in the world generally in our current culture the elitist secular atheists who are permeating everything in our culture saying the rest of you believe what we believe you see our society has rightly rejected the Christianity that uses its universal values and truth claims to oppress people I believe they have rightly rejected that that's where we sit right now the world does not need any more exclusive truth claims as a leverage to oppress people what this world needs is absolute truth and values that do not turn believers into oppressors what we need is non-oppressive universal truth the believers of Jesus claim to universal truth we need for that truth truth to turn us to turn us believers into agents of justice and service we need to be people who don't look down on others or feel superior to others or ridicule and rubbish others we don't people who don't oppress others people who don't coerce others but people who love and serve others and I believe that's the solution to this universal truth claim the Christian gospel that proclaims

Jesus is savior and lord is exactly what this world needs and a hint of that solution to the problem is in Acts 4 take a look at verses 8 to 13 with me then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said to them rulers and elders of the people if we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and being asked how he was healed then know this you and all the people of Israel it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed Jesus is the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that these were unschooled ordinary men they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with

Jesus note firstly that Jesus saves us through rejection verse 11 the stone you build is rejected which has become the cornerstone he saved us not through power but through service through rejection not by accumulating power but in fact by giving up power surrendering himself dying on the cross for our sins so that God's love would come flooding into our lives he saved us through grace through love through service the only way to become a Christian is in fact to give up all notions all notions of superiority all notions that we are better than other people salvation only comes to people who admit that they are sinners and they need grace and it is this work of salvation in Peter and John's life that's behind verse 13 when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled ordinary men they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with

Jesus let me tell you why these religious leaders were astonished by Peter and John outside of Jesus as it was in the first century so it is in the 21st century outside of Jesus our identity is based on relative status we are normally proud we are not normally proud of being smart we just generally get proud of being smarter than someone else around us that's generally it's relative status that's generally how we work everyone gets an identity through salvation by works we don't usually use the word salvation it's more self-esteem through works or self-worth through works in a traditional society such as mostly eastern societies your identity is attached to roles that have been assigned to you your worth is attached to the roles that have been assigned to you so you feel good about yourself because you are a good father or a good mother or a good husband or a good wife or a good son or a good daughter in an individualistic society like western societies we get our identity through accomplishments

[20 : 31] I am smarter than you I've got a better car than you I am richer than you I'm better looking than you I'm more talented than you it's all relative but it's always relative so that there are always people that we feel superior to and there will be people that we will feel inferior to and the religious leaders were shocked when they talked to Peter and John they were ordinary it's emphasized they were ordinary unschooled men and in a patriarchal society ordinary men didn't have the pedigree or the schooling and like these guys and they would have been ashamed and quiet in the presence of these leaders they would have had their heads bowed and they wouldn't have spoken then and these leaders are astonished that these two men have a brand new system of identity they aren't ashamed and they're not afraid of anyone above them but they're also not feel superior to anyone below them it wasn't below them for an act of kindness to the crippled man what a transformation these religious leaders witness this is the

Peter who boldly speaks here he's the same Peter who went all jelly mead in front of a servant girl of the high priest and yet here is Peter this is the Peter who denied Jesus and here's the Peter who's proclaiming the exclusive claims of Jesus not just before the high priest servant but in fact the high priest and all the rulers of Israel their self esteem is not based on their accomplishments or their works it's based on the grace of God that's what's happened to Peter and John and that's what happens to every Christian you can only become a Christian if you admit that you in fact deserve hell and only the costly sacrifice of Jesus and his triumphant resurrection has saved you God's grace means you cannot feel superior to anyone anyone is there anything more repugnant than to be proud about the grace of God anything the universal truth of

Jesus is that he died for his enemies he said father forgive them for they do not know what they're doing Christianity has the truth but it's a truth that's meant to turn us into non-oppressive grace-bearing merciful people what this world needs is truth and people who have a new identity because of that truth which makes them into humble servants to everyone around them Christians Christians have been oppressors in the past can you find that anywhere in the Bible that justifies that can you get that out of the person of Jesus at all one of the most exclusive claims I've ever heard is the claim that good people from all faiths will eventually find

God it's terribly exclusive what about the bad people like me what happens to them see their claim is incredibly exclusive it's only the good people Christianity says it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done it doesn't matter it doesn't matter repent rest in Jesus and what he has done for you and God delights in you and he gives you a new identity and the Christian gospel is an exclusive truth but it is the most inclusive truth there is in the world everyone's making exclusive claims but Christianity is the only the most inclusive of the exclusive truths and it's what our world needs let me just say about in terms of where we are in our society our

Christian mission has always thrived by surging in the margins and under the radar when we somehow get into positions of power the wheels fall off and that's what we're experiencing in the west at the moment it's pretty much the way it's always been since the third century in fact as Christianity spread throughout the first three centuries as a persecuted minority people it just exploded and the conversion of Constantine paved the way for it becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire by the end of the fourth century only Christianity became the official religion and from that moment the church lost its prophetic voice and its vibrancy many religions like Islam for example seem to thrive on the conquest and power

[26 : 11] Christianity grows best through hardship through by being marginalized pushed to the edges and so I think where we exist right now in the west in this culture where we are right now is an unprecedented opportunity for the Christian gospel the history of the church tells me that even a culture that wants to get rid of Christianity isn't a hindrance to the church being effective in representing Jesus the early Christians it just exploded 40% a decade for nearly 300 years was the growth rate and at a time when early Christians did not engage in public preaching because it was too dangerous there were practically no evangelists no missionaries there was no mission boards there was no organizations they didn't have evangelistic courses Christian explained after Nero's persecution in the mid first century church services in fact closed its doors to visitors churches you weren't welcome in the church if you're a visitor deacons used to stand at the front doors of the church gatherings not to hand out bulletins but as bouncers to keep people out just in case you're an informer prominent people scorned

Christianity Christians were discriminated against in countless petty ways it was incredibly hard to be Christian and yet the church exploded why?

because Christians were attractive their concern for the weak for the poor the marginalized their integrity in the face of persecution their financial generosity their sacrificial love even for their enemies and the high quality of their common life together non-believers were first of all attracted to the community and lives of Christians and therefore became open to talking about the truths the exclusive truths of the gospel I'm very keen for us both corporately and individually as a church to be engaged in acts of justice and mercy both here in Chatswood and wherever God has placed us Monday to Saturday to be non- oppressors to be servants of others for instance it is not well known that Chatswood is home to more than a dozen legal and illegal brothels and there is currently no ministry whatsoever into that space it's in our parish boundaries and so we as a church are going to seek to reach those in the sex industry in Chatswood through acts of care acts of kindness our hope is that over time we'll be able to develop deeper trust with those affected by this industry and possibly build systems of referral and exiting options for those workers

God has opened the door already for initial steps I've been taken a pilot team of five women yesterday attended a training ministry which I was very excited about and on Wednesday they went around to a number of these brothels stood out the front of those brothels and prayed for them the next steps are going to include a whole lot of prayer where God will take us and give clarity on what concrete things we need to put in place to build relationship with brothels hope

purpose meaning joy satisfaction is found in no other name salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to man by which we must be saved and at St.

[33 : 39] Paul's we believe that exclusive truth claim and so we exist as a church to know Jesus to treasure Jesus and to represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people and because we believe that claim is true for all people may we have the confidence and the boldness of Peter and John and be united in our desperation for the world around us to encounter Jesus and our desire to represent the diversity of Chatswood