

Focus on Distraction

Matthew 6:24-34; Philippians 3:12-14

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

22nd January 2012

Making mistakes is something we all do every day. We make mistakes at home. We make mistakes at work. In all areas of our lives. We make mistakes of judgment. We make mistakes by jumping to wrong conclusions. We make mistakes by acting impetuously. Thankfully, the mistakes we make can usually be corrected quickly and easily. Thankfully, also, our mistakes are fairly private things and don't normally attract all that much attention.

That, of course, was not the case with the captain of the Costa Concordia a week past Friday. The mistake or, rather, mistakes, that Francesco Schettino made have been writ large across the world's newspapers, network TV reports, as well as the internet, for all to see. Not only his faulty navigational judgment but his subsequent dereliction of duty instantly became one of the highest of high profile stories of recent times.

Why did the Captain of the Costa Concordia do what he did or didn't do what he should have done? That's the question on everyone's mind. Maybe, among other reasons, it was because he was distracted. Distracted from a job that he obviously knew how to do and, seemingly, up until that point, had done relatively well. He was distracted by the need to show off. He was distracted by his overarching pride. He was distracted by a mistaken belief in his own invincibility. He was distracted by the high life he seems to have led. And all to the point where he took his eye off what should have been his main goal: the safety of his ship and passengers. And now he is paying a very high price. How are the mighty fallen!

The whole subject of distraction is, of course, a very central one in our society today. Particularly as it relates to the use of cell-phones and texting while driving. Activities that can kill by crashing a car just as surely as grounding a cruise ship.

And it's not only cell phones that cause distractions on the road but other activities too that divert people from the main goal of driving safely. What about the people we have seen driving while engaged in multiples distractions at the one time. Like the man on the #401, driving at 120 km per hour, who had his newspaper propped up against the steering wheel while he was holding a sandwich and using a shaver with the other hand. Bad enough, I suppose, but not in the same league as the woman who was stopped by police for driving while applying her makeup and, at the same time, breast-feeding her baby!

It's not only on the roads that we are a prey to distraction. How often at work are we distracted from the task at hand by the latest scuttlebutt about a fellow employee? Or, at home, a titillating TV talk-show will

soon distract us from shovelling the snow or clearing out the closet.

And, hard to believe though it may be, distractions follow us right into church. Certainly not, of course, during my sermons! I have long been aware that my listeners hear and take note of 100% of what I say! Never do their minds wander to such mundane things as "Where will we go for lunch today?" or "How many pipes does the organ have?" or "Rev. Turner looks so youthful. Surely, he can't be at the age of retirement!"

But, what about distractions in other areas of church life, I wonder.

Have you seen the TV show, often aired on PBS, called "The Vicar of Dibley" about a woman Anglican priest, serving in an English village? At the parish council meetings a motley crew of church members sit around supposedly discussing the pressing business of church and community. Chairman David Horton, with his upper-class accent and condescending ways, valiantly tries to impose some semblance of order on the assembled parish committee, constantly trying to focus their minds on the issues at hand. But despite his best efforts, everyone goes off at the most divergent tangents imaginable. While the vicar is trying to find a date for the parish fete, Owen insists on discussing the state of pig dung on his farm, while Jim, the old curmudgeon, discourses at length on whether the "Great Storm of 47" was worse than the "Great Freeze of 63". Five hours later, after exhausting every possible alternative date for the fete and succumbing to every distraction possible, someone suddenly discovers it can be held on the original date after all.¹

Is this not a parable of the contemporary church? Rather than staying tightly focused on the central issues of faith and service and mission, we constantly get side-tracked, diffusing our energies on secondary issues and avoiding the central challenge of being the church in the 21st century. We Christians have taken our eyes off the ball, so to speak, and all with the result that we are losing our effectiveness and cutting-edge in today's world, no longer challenging people's complacencies, no longer changing people's hearts and minds for the better, no longer transforming our world into a more just and compassionate place as we are called to do.

A lot is said in the Bible about encouraging the people of God to avoid distraction and to become more focused. St. Paul says that the Christian needs to be just as focused as the runner in a race. "This one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."² The writer of the Book of Hebrews echoes this, "Since we are surrounded by such

great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight ... and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”³

Then there’s the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus reminds his disciples they should not worry about matters of human existence such as eating, drinking and clothing. Rather, they should focus on spiritual matters and, when they do, all these other concerns will take care of themselves. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” he tells them, “and all these things will yours as well.”⁴

In times when we get so easily distracted in our service of the church, these words of Jesus remind us exactly where our true focus should be. On advancing God’s kingdom. On furthering the cause of Christ. On telling people about his love. And showing forth that love in terms of practical service.

It’s very easy to think that our principal business as a church is to keep a building in existence, to count numbers in the pews, to attend meetings, to raise money, to socialise, to enjoy sacred music and to listen to sermons. But while these are all important components of our involvement with the church, we must remember they are not the central purpose and we must avoid being distracted by them. Our central purpose, rather, is seeking and serving and building God’s kingdom, bringing people to faith, ministering to a needy world in his name. All other activities are a means to serving this end and we must never forget it. As Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God.”

Writer Richard Ferris tells how in the 1957 World Series, New York was playing the Milwaukee Braves in the World Series when Yogi Berra was the catcher for the Yankees and Hank Aaron was the chief power hitter for Milwaukee. “As usual,” Ferris says, “Yogi was engaged in his ceaseless chatter, intended to distract the Milwaukee batters. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, ‘Henry, you’re holding the bat wrong. You’re supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark.’ Aaron didn’t say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, ‘I didn’t come up here to read trademarks. I came here to hit home runs.’”⁵

Just like Hank Aaron, avoiding distraction and maintaining focus is something our congregation is going to have to do during the impending vacancy. With the different procedures that will have to be enacted during this interim period, it might be tempting for us to become engrossed in this process and assume this is all we need to be doing to be the church at this time. Then without a settled ministry for a while, it might be that we would think that all we have to do is simply mark time until a new minister comes. But this is not the way it must be. Despite the distractions of the vacancy, St. Paul’s must continue to be the church, worshipping with vigour and vitality, serving the needy of our community, attracting new members, renewing our mission – doing all those things that we have

been doing and even more. Although we are entering a period of transition, this is no time for the church to be sidetracked. We still have to focus on what the essential work of the church is: Telling forth the Good News, living out God’s love and building his kingdom.

Remember also that, though we are entering on what might be an unsettling time and an uncertain future, we need to focus on the fact that we are in good hands. We are in the good hands of a very experienced interim moderator in the person of the Rev. Tom Cunningham. We are in the very capable hands of an excellent group of lay leaders in the form of our Session, Board and Trustees. But more than anything, we are in the firm grasp of higher hands – the very hands of God himself who will carry this congregation safely forward even though we might not see what lies ahead.

So don’t be distracted by the thought of an uncertain future. Focus on trusting God and knowing that he will take care of his people in this place, as he has in the past. Just as Jesus says, “Don’t start worrying where will my food come from? Or, my drink? Or my clothes? Your father in heaven knows that you need all these things. Instead be concerned above all else with the Kingdom of God, and what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all that you need.”

Yes, during the unfamiliar and unusual time that lies ahead – a time that St. Paul’s only seems to experience every 25 years – let’s not be distracted by the transition process but rather let’s maintain our focus on being the church, doing those things that God wants us to be doing, keeping our eyes on the prize of the upward call, being concerned above all for the building of his kingdom. And, as we do, we can be sure that God will lead us safely through to the new and exciting times that lie ahead.

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¹ Dawn French, “The Vicar of Dibley”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/vicarofdibley>

² Philippians 3:14

³ Hebrews 12:1

⁴ Matthew 6:33

⁵ Richard W. Ferris, “Enjoy The Scenery”, Sermons for Sundays: In Lent and Easter: Temptation of the Palms, CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, 0788023241b