

Why resonance is a part of mission

Cathedral canon and theology professor **Graeme Smith** examines our appeal to the unchurched



WHATEVER we may think of Brexit, we can't deny it has produced some memorable slogans. 'Take Back Control' and 'Get Brexit Done' rank alongside 'Make American Great Again' as phrases that define this era.

In a soundbite culture, it's easy to assume that a snappy phrase like that makes the difference between victory and defeat in an election or referendum. In fact, it's not the brevity or repetition of the phrase that matters, but whether it taps into people's emotions.

'Get Brexit Done' rang true, as it reflected the heartfelt desire of people to end the political paralysis – almost regardless of what happens next. The fact that Brexit wasn't 'done' on January 31 is neither here nor there. What's significant is that Tory strategists understood the significance of that overwhelming emotion.

As an academic, I'd describe that process as 'emotional resonance'. It's someone in public life understanding what people are feeling and reflecting it back to them. For a politician, this empathy is a vote-winner. Thatcher, Blair, Obama and – to a certain extent – Boris Johnson appear to have it. Skilful politicians craft their message by building on key ideas that resonate.

But what does that mean for the Church, which also has a message to promote and adherents to attract? We tend to talk about mission in terms of having to persuade people that their worldview is wrong and ours is right, a model of condemnation or correction, not resonance.

'Skilful politicians craft a message by building ideas that resonate'

The perfect image for this view is the pulpit – it's assumed the priest knows everything and imparts his or her wisdom to everyone else. It leads us into confrontation with the world, which in turn often leads those who don't go to church to dismiss us as irrelevant or outdated because we don't resonate with their lives.

The assumption underpinning this model is that the secular world cannot 'do' theology, that those without the Church's access to our Christian heritage have no way of understanding or experiencing God.

What if we changed our approach? What if instead we tried to affirm or to resonate with those aspects of the Christian faith that are already in the

world, and then tried to build on them? We in the West have been Christian for 2,000 years. In that time much of it has rubbed off.

At one level this might mean valuing how much people know about the Christmas story, and want to celebrate it through school nativities, rather than bemoaning their overall lack of Biblical knowledge. It might mean building on the idea that individual people are special and unique, to be valued in their own right – as children of God, as we might say. Something which is true wherever they come from. It might mean understanding the planet as a gift, shared with other creatures, rather than a resource to be exploited. It means talking about the theology that is in the world, not presuming its absence.

Resonance is a principle of effective communication. But it is more than that. It is a belief that sometimes, not always, the Church has to listen to the theology being spoken to it, rather than assuming it knows all there is to know about God.

It is a recognition that people outside the Church also wrestle with godly matters. If these people feel that the Church understands this, then they are much more likely to listen to the other things we want to say.