

**Vision (I): Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service**

Today we are beginning a sermon mini-series. For the next 3 weeks we will be looking more closely at our vision statement: 'Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service'. And I'm kicking off today by focusing on 'transforming lives'.

'Do not be conformed to this world', says the apostle Paul in our reading from Romans 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds'.

Transformation is a word we're pretty familiar with. It is beloved of advertisers - we have 'transformational' dieting or, if that doesn't work, there is the 'Transform' Cosmetic Surgery Group. We're invited to 'transform' with Max factor, and in the business world IBM offers end to end transformation. Transformation involves change, but whereas change can be either negative or positive, transformation is to do with positive and sometimes radical change. In the New Testament the Greek word is metamorpho (literally to change into another form) from which comes the word metamorphosis - and that's the kind of change that takes place when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. And in the New Testament the word is used to describe what happened to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration - when 'his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white' (Matthew 17:1-2). And it is used to speak of Christians becoming more like Christ as it is here in Romans, and in 2 Corinthians (3:18) - 'as we see the glory of the Lord we are all being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another'.

Transformation is not a one-off event. Our minds are being renewed (present continuous tense). Our lives are being transformed - we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. It is an ongoing process. We do not, this side of glory, reach a place where we can be satisfied that sufficient transformation has taken place. We are to go on being renewed, to go on being transformed, growing in our faith and being open to God's transforming Spirit working in us and through us.

Of course, we can and do expect certain things to change when we first encounter Jesus. Many a person will be able to testify to the immediate life changing effect of becoming a Christian. The word used, conversion, suggests something dramatic happens, that changes take place. When I became a Christian as a young adult it did feel as though my life had been turned upside down. But that was only the beginning. The process is life-long.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax-collector and a rich man. In first century Roman occupied Palestine the highest bidder paid in advance to collect taxes from a district. In this system the tax collector made his living, usually as much as he could get, from hiking up the tolls and customs. These were the tax collectors of the gospel, in league with the Romans and clearly making a living from creaming off excess tax. But in our Gospel reading something quite remarkable happens when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus. Immediately there are some dramatic changes and he says to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' We have no reason to doubt that he did just that. And we don't know what Zacchaeus went on to do, but if he was to follow Christ in love and service then this would be only a beginning, he would continue to be transformed by the renewing of his mind.

Transformation in the Christian life is not a one-off. It's certainly not like the woman who testified to the transformation in her life that had resulted through her experience in conversion. She declared, "I'm so glad I got converted. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I'd never go to his funeral. But now, why, I'd be happy to go to it any time."

Our vision statement is about transforming lives - the ongoing process of lives being changed. But our vision is not focused only in one direction. Transforming lives - what as a Church we want to see happening amongst is, in each of our lives - is also what we are called to enable outside of this community of faith. As well as being changed, we are also to be agents of change.

Zacchaeus met with Jesus and the process of transformation began. We too, need to introduce others to Jesus, to his transforming power, so that the Spirit's work can take place in them as well as us. Following Christ in love and service will take us beyond our church community to the wider world to share and to show our faith to others. Transforming lives – we want to see that happening in us *and* in those around us. As our minds are being renewed, so too will our faith become more confident. But we need practical help too, in order to share our faith. And that's partly why the next housegroup course is based around John Pritchard's book – How to explain your faith. Please do look out for the sign-up sheet and more information in the next few weeks.

'Be transformed by the renewing of your minds', says Paul, 'then you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect'. Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who transforms us and renews our mind, but we must play our part, we must co-operate with the Spirit. The most basic power we have over our minds is that we can choose what we pay attention to. At any moment we can choose to turn our thoughts in one direction or another. To sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs as we talked about two weeks ago – or to fill our minds with grumbling, cynicism and complaint. It is within our capacity to 'set our minds'. And what a difference a mindset can make, two people can be in the same set of circumstances and yet have completely different experiences. It's a bit like cats and dogs. Listen to these excerpts from a dog's diary and a cat's diary to see the difference a mindset can make

### **Excerpts from a dog's diary:**

8.00am – Dog food! My favourite thing!  
9.30am – A car ride! My favourite thing!  
9.40am – A walk in the park! My favourite thing!  
10.30am – Got rubbed and patted! My favourite thing!  
12.00pm – Lunch! My favourite thing!  
1.00pm – Played in the garden! My favourite thing!  
3.00pm – Chased my tail! My favourite thing!  
5.00pm – Milk bones! My favourite thing!  
7.00pm – Played ball! My favourite thing!  
8.00pm – Wow! watched TV with the people! My favourite thing!  
11.00pm – Curled up in my bed! My favourite thing!

### **Excerpt from a cat's diary**

Day 983 of my captivity. My captors continue to me taunt with bizarre, little dangling objects. The only thing that keeps me going is my dream of escape

Be transformed, says St Paul, by the renewing of your minds. We have to play our part and we have to be willing to be transformed, to invite God to work in every aspect of our lives – even our minds – and to open ourselves up to the Spirit's transforming work in us. We are not to stay as we are. Rather, we are to become the people God intends us, created us, to be. We are to become the sort of people that Paul goes onto talk about in verses 9-17 – people who love, who serve, who do not lag in zeal; people who rejoice in hope, persevere in prayer, extend hospitality to strangers; people who are generous, humble and peaceable; people who are not overcome by evil but who overcome evil with good.

God is in the business of transforming lives, from one degree of glory to another. And as we are being transformed, so too, I believe, God will graciously use us in his work of transforming others; the effects of our own transformation rippling out to touch the lives of those around us.

Are we ready for that? Are we willing to be part of it? Transformation, by definition, involves change and sometimes that can feel uncomfortable, sometimes we want to resist any change at all costs. It can seem quite attractive to keep things the way they are, to maintain our comfortable habits and ways of doing things. But our relationship with God doesn't work like that. God is always beckoning to us, calling us on, wanting us to experience more of who he is, more of his life giving power, wanting us to receive more of his love. The Christian life is a life of transformations.