

Vision Sermon Series 16th September 201: 'In Love and Service' by Mark Pilgrim

The title of the book that became my 'Bible' for our Vision began 'Church **Unique**': it kept asking 'What's distinctive about your church? What's the hallmark... what's special, particular about your church that marks it out as different to other churches in the area?' The answer for St Peter's is found in this story:

October 2010: Bishop Lee came to our 9.45am Sunday service. He preached. He commissioned a group of people to be St Peter's Vision Working Group. He listened to people in church and over coffee, picking up on what Christian faith meant to them and how they lived it in their daily lives. And during the afternoon, as he accompanied the Vision Working Group for their first meeting, he commented movingly and with great appreciation on the practical outworking of Christian faith that he could discern going on through St Peter's. He heard about the Marigold system; the Trolley at the back of church and the ongoing support for the Sisters of the Church; people's involvement in the Julian night shelter and Caring at Christmas; the Peter Fund and the support of young people in secondary education in Uganda.

He summed his discovery up in this phrase: 'There's a tremendous lot of love being shared here... and the Secret Service is alive and well and living at St Peter's, Henleaze.'

That's a fascinating, subtle commendation, isn't it? 'The Secret Service is alive and well and living at St Peter's, Henleaze.'

It acknowledges that powerful, effective service – help and loving care – is going on here, offered by people in a myriad of different ways. It's not talked about openly. It's not explicit. It's done quietly and without fuss. It's a very British way of doing things! The question he left us with, not completely articulated but 'half-spoken', was: 'Is it too 'underground'? Is there, could there be a way of imbuing this care and service not just with a British twist, not just with a middle-class twist - but with a Christian twist? Can we, should we imbue our care and service with a clearer, more distinctive Christian flavour? In the same way as the Christmas advert exhorts people to put the Christ back into Christmas, should and could St Peter's put Christ more explicitly into the outworking of our Christian faith?

So here we are: 2 years after Bishop Lee's perceptive visit. The answer to the question 'What is God calling St Peter's to' specifically and intentionally includes a hallmark of St Peter's – something that St Peter's is good at and can celebrate: 'love and service'. How does the Vision statement run? 'Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service'

But now, in September 2012, we are at a pivotal point. The challenge for us to rise to is not just treating the Vision as a statement of what is. It is to see it much more as an opportunity to develop ever more into the community of faith that God knows we can be and calls us to become. 'Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service' isn't an opportunity to rest on our love, care and service laurels. It's a reminder constantly to ask 'What next?' 'What more?' 'How is God calling us to love and serve differently?'

We see the first disciples faced with similar questions in Luke 22 this morning. It's the Last Supper. They had followed Jesus for three years through thick and thin. They had helped people, cured people, made people realise that God's mercy and grace extended far more widely than many had thought. Now, at this holy moment of the Last Supper, a dispute arises. The disciples start to bicker. 'Who has been the best servant?' 'Who given more help – who will God reward with the closest position to him in heaven?' 'Hang on' says Jesus 'It isn't over yet! Please keep going: keep serving. And remember: I am among you as one who serves. So keep looking for more and different ways to share God's kingdom, to invite people into God's kingdom, being concerned as you do so to help them deepen their relationship with God through Christ. Serve them in this way and you will find yourself seated at the final banquet in the kingdom of heaven'.

Let's put this call to fresh service in a current context.

If you look on the Diocese of Bristol's website you will find videos and statistics in which growth is being celebrated. Across the Diocese, it seems, more people are attending churches than was the case 10 years ago.

150 new services have been started. More people, as a proportion of church attenders, have stepped forward to become authorised or ordained Ministers than in any other Diocese. Bristol Diocese is in the top three of Diocese's where giving has increased.

It's great to celebrate that St Peter's can say it's part of this growth story. Our 4oC service is one of those 150 new services which is attracting new and different people.

But it's also vital that, here at St Peter's, we take on board a long range warning that is becoming more and more a reality: while new people are appearing and joining our services – both the monthly 4oC and the weekly 9.45 – because of age and infirmity, more people are disappearing than appearing. Unlike a good number of churches elsewhere in the Diocese, our total number of attenders is going down.

So I offer this exploration of our Vision in this sermon series as a clarion call to re-examine what we are good at and as an invitation, as Jesus invited his friends at the Last Supper, to recalibrate priorities. How can we live out our Christian lives, how can we love and serve people, how can we worship and honour God in a way that sees still more people appearing at St Peter's, becoming part of Christ's community of faith, and engaging in Christ's mission in the world, fuelled by worship in this building?

The answer, I believe, lies in awillingness, in the months ahead to follow the example of those first disciples. For all that has been done in faithful service, there is more for us to do yet. There is more for us to do better and differently, with a greater degree and emphasis on putting other people first, serving their rather than our own needs first. The target is a realignment of preferences and priorities so that, say by this time next year, more people are appearing and staying at St Peter's rather than disappearing.

How about this as an easy to remember reminder of what I am saying. You have heard it said that 'www' stands for 'the world wide web' but I say unto you 'Let www stand for something different. Let www stand, in the Christian life for this: 'Worship, Walk and Witness'.

WORSHIP God in ways which serve the growth and increase of God's kingdom. Be aware and develop aspects of worship which deepen your relationship with God. But think too – and think more - about what worship, what worship forms and styles will encourage more people in future to find their lives transformed as they follow Christ through St Peters. Keep **WALKING** out into the world, sharing the love of Christ in your volunteering, in your love and service expressed at work and at home. Find Christ accompanying you and others on the road as you act as Christ's hands, eyes and feet in the world today. But, crucially, be sure to add and make clear the third 'W': **Worship, Walk and Witness**. Our love and service is offered in the world ultimately for and because of God – who calls us to find and experience fulfilment in life through relationship with God. God's loving and serving nature was revealed supremely in the person we, gathering at St Peters, are seeking to follow: Jesus Christ.

So: to witness more clearly, to witness more intentionally, to witness more effectively – to invite people to take up ultimately fulfilling challenge of having life transformed through following Christ: get hold of the book our House Groups are using, John Pritchard's 'How to explain your faith'. Read the book. Discuss it with others. Join a House Group – booking forms are in your hand or at the back of church. Don't do nothing – do something!

Do something which will mean that, effective as St Peter's has been in the past at transforming lives through following Christ in love and service, we see that transforming, we see that following of Christ, we see that love and service of Christ more and more effectively brought into being both in us and around us. How then can we become more explicit and effective in our practice of Christian love and service?

'WWW'

WORSHIP Worship of Christ

WALK Walk with Christ

WITNESS Witness to Christ.

Amen.