

**Sermon for 5th October 2014:
'How to link Page 3 and St Peter's call from God'**

How many people have read the Weekly Sheet page 3, item 1? It's about our new Church & Hall Development Plans. How, you might ask, can we consider such developments with little fuss and fanfare?

It's because two people died in 2013 leaving bequests with a view to resourcing God's mission through St Peter's in quite a major way. These bequests total some £150,000.

The responsibility for maximising the extension of God's kingdom through the good use of this money is quite heavy. As I hope you would expect, your Church Council has spent a good deal of time already thinking and discussing how this money can assist St Peter's in its primary aim of transforming lives through following Christ in love and service.

Good stewardship of the resources God provides for the full realisation of his kingdom are themes at the heart of today's readings. Jesus invites the chief priests and elders of the people to consider their stewardship of God's revelation of himself to the people of Israel that God has entrusted to them. How are they doing? Jesus tells a story and invites his listeners to appreciate its spiritual meaning. (If, like me, you are a Scrabble player, you may like to know that a person seeking the spiritual significance in words can be called, in 7 letters, an 'anagoge'). More importantly, Jesus invites his high ranking Jewish listeners to see that they and their predecessors were departing from God's way. What they should have done, he says, is welcome the new, the different way of life the prophets recommended. It's a way of life Jesus himself then embodied, a life in which the last shall be first and the first last, a life you lose to find it, a life through which God offers people freedom and fulfilment as we follow as closely as possible the person and teachings of Jesus.

Such a switch in behaviour and priorities is possible – even within the hard-bitten 1st century Jewish leadership. The Gospels tell us that both Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea made the radical and risky move from being members of the Establishment, the Jewish Council to becoming followers of the new and revolutionary Jesus Christ. And of course another leader loyal to Jewish tradition has passed down an unparalleled written record of his transformation from Pharisee and harsh persecutor of the first Christians to become one of the greatest transmitters of Christian faith in the whole of Christian history. In our passage from Philippians, Paul describes his journey from the certainties of Pharisaism and its ancient, outmoded ways to the joy and challenge of faith in Christ – a journey and a transformation which Paul is keen to say, hasn't stopped yet. He, like us all, is still a work in progress: God is always and perpetually calling us to risk, renewal and resurrection. From security to risk; from old ways to renewal; through death to resurrection.

So – stewards of God's vineyard gathering here at St Peter's in October 2014: what are we to do? What patterns and certainties that we have taken to be God's truth might God be wanting to change and transform in us?

If you want to identify a divine or Godly quality in the developments listed at the top of page 3 of the Weekly Sheet, it seems to me there is one. And it is this: Hospitality. Hospitality.

‘God-incidentally’ perhaps, hospitality was the divine quality Paul Roberts, our preacher at the 9.45 service two weeks ago, singled out as a trademark of Jesus. Jesus’ hospitality was what Paul encouraged us to emulate and make evident – both in our lives and in our Eucharistic worship: hospitality – making people feel welcome, especially, where appropriate, by sharing food. Let’s take a look at each bullet point.

Platform: firstly it’s an aid to lifting people up – to making them recognisable, visible and audible as they seek to share with others in the church the good things of God. A platform is a way of improving communication; it’s a way of affirming people. It will improve our ability to make people feel welcome – whether they are sat in the chairs being welcomed or stood on the stage offering gifts to share with everyone present. People on the platform might be children at Christmas services, clergy, ministers and Music Group leading services or singers and musicians at concerts: all of them, though, will be engaged in the hospitable work of sharing God’s gifts with others.

And to have an altar here, to be able to celebrate the meal of the Lord’s Supper – from much more within the heart of where God’s people gather – will be, once again, to make the divine characteristic of hospitality more evident. It will be a way to make more clear ‘The Lord is here’ – The Lord is with us, close by... the Lord is not ‘there’ (*point to the high altar*) – far away, withdrawn and out of sight... The Lord is HERE – Among us. High, far away altars have their place in emphasising the other-worldly, transcendent, completely different aspects of God: but, important and relevant as they still are, it is the immanence, the close presence, the companionship of God that we seem to be called to emphasise in these early years of the 21st Century.

Then there’s the sound system and lighting. How unwelcoming is it to invite people into a place where they can’t either hear or see well? Surely it’s not good to be striving for good communication, to be enabling a clear flow of words from God to people, from people to God and from people to people – and for the whole process to sound sometimes like the people at the front are talking underwater? So improving the clarity and quality of our sound system will be part of our move towards greater hospitality: as will changing the lighting system. This, it has to be said, will be required of us anyway, because the bulbs our fixtures use are now no longer made. The whole system is obsolete and we need to start again – but it will be an opportunity to develop our church interior in an integrated fashion, so that the lighting dovetails with the platform and audio developments to create as warm and welcoming atmosphere as current technology can provide.

Next on the Weekly Sheet is the development of refreshment facilities in the Church and the Meeting Room. How wonderful it has been to have funerals here in church where family, friends and acquaintances have been able to stay together, chatting and sharing memories because a dedicated team of St Peter’s people have laboured to bring an urn and loads of cups, saucers and plates from the Hall kitchen and back again – sometimes threatening to break their backs as they have done it! The opportunity to offer hospitality – especially light refreshments – in church, whether after funerals or after 10.30 Thursday Communion or at sundry other times across the week, especially when the Hall is occupied, is not to be missed. These occasions for hospitality aid God’s mission. Having a cup of coffee together (always, in my case, with a biscuit!) encourages community and enables communication. It promotes fellowship and develops relationships. Being more hospitable in the church and in the

Meeting Room will, in a small but significant way, help St Peter's do what we believe God is calling us to do: Transform lives through following Christ in love and service.

And finally we are looking at the possibility of linking the church and hall with what might, in effect, be a glass corridor. The advantage, of course, would be keeping people warm and dry as they move from one building to another. The deeper purpose, I would suggest, is to make a real and actual link between what are often seen as our sacred and secular spaces. Some people find the look of St Peter's from the car park quite daunting and forbidding. How many people never come into this church because the steps are too steep and uninviting? How many more people might cross the threshold and enter the church if it was easy and clear that you could go straight from Hall to Church on one level? Again, improving our hospitality is the theological rationale for considering this physical development: it is yet another opportunity to embody Christ – if we have the resources to do so.

The stage the PCC is at is that designs and quotes are being sought from a number of expert providers. People are coming from Doncaster and London to look at the possibilities. Decisions will be made by your PCC only after prayer, reflection and discussion. The free flow of communication, of ideas, comments and suggestions between people with different perspectives and contributions to make will always, I trust, be a hallmark of people connected to St Peter's. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for decisions is with the PCC – those members of this community who were elected as responsible representatives at previous AGM's.

Please talk to them and pray for them – including me – as, following Jesus's teaching in today's parable, we seek to be faithful tenants of God's vineyard in this neighbourhood, continuing to develop the buildings entrusted to our care to **transform our lives and the lives of other people through following Christ in love and service.** Amen.