

## Vision Sermon Series: No 4 'Going – with faith' by Mark Pilgrim 16<sup>th</sup> Dec 2012

This is the final sermon in a series of 4, exploring and deepening our appreciation of St Peter's Vision. When we ask 'What is God calling us to?' our response and Vision - is 'transforming lives through following Christ in love and service'.

To help us put this vision into action we focus on three actions – Knowing, Growing and Going. In the first sermon of the series we looked at implementing the whole vision by more T R Y – trying:

T stood for Trusting, R stood for Risking and Y stood for Yielding

Caroline's sermon, concentrating on Knowing, encouraged us to know and follow Christ not just with our heads but with our bodies, hearts and souls – to experience God whole-heartedly and not just in theory. Last week Sarah recommended that we grow not just through our own efforts but, to use an agricultural word, by 'cross-pollinating'. She urged us to look very definitely to God and to other people for help when trying to deepen our faith and understanding.

And now, in this sermon, let's think about the third of our three actions: Going. Our Vision leaflet – copies of which can be found at the back of the church if you haven't got one – encourages us to move towards other people locally and elsewhere in the world both to offer spiritual and pastoral care and to explore and explicitly recommend Christian faith.

The word, of course, for a person who seeks to share their Christian faith is 'evangelist'. It's worth knowing where this word comes from. It's from two Greek words – 'eu' meaning 'good' and 'angellos' meaning 'message'. So we who carry and share the good news of God's coming to the world in Jesus can and should be called 'evangelists'. Simply put every person who has faith in Christ has the capacity and the responsibility to be 'an evangelist' - a 'good news messenger'. It's on each and every one of us going from this building this morning as 'evangelists, as 'good news messengers' that we'll focus on now.

Simply put, my prayer is that all of us here today today will find more ways to share our Christian faith with others wherever we are. In a nutshell: let's just try and find more ways to share our Christian faith with others. Let me share with you my own recent experience. Back in September I began encouraging everyone (including myself) to do more talking about Christian faith when we meet people in our daily lives. Nothing seemed to happen, in my case, for a little while! But then things have happened quickly! In the last month I have had a number of significant opportunities to share my Christian faith with others. This is one of them:

When I was growing up in a village outside Guildford in Surrey, my best friend was a boy called Patten Smith. I haven't seen Patten since my father's funeral in 1988 – but he tracked me down and rang to tell me his own mother - who had been like a 2<sup>nd</sup> Mum to me when I was growing up - had died. In the course of talking about his mother's funeral he mentioned that he still wasn't a believer in God. This was no change from when he was a teenager – but he went on to say he was interested in and wanted to know more about the Bible. Perhaps I could help him – he mused. I said I would be delighted to help him with this challenge. At the funeral itself, three weeks ago, we talked about the Bible and the power of words to convey human insight and knowledge. Well, 10 days ago I emailed Patten with some suggestions for him to begin to read and appreciate elements of the Bible and so of Christian faith for himself. Knowing that Patten is passionately concerned about justice and care for vulnerable and oppressed people in the world I suggested Luke's parable of the prodigal son and Isaiah chapters 60 and 61. Both passages give the reader a picture of God's grace and of God's concern for justice, the outsider and the despised. In addition I included an image from Rembrandt's portrait of the Return of the Prodigal Son – where Rembrandt paints the merciful father as having two very different hands. One is definitely that of a man and the other is much more like that of a woman – indicating that Rembrandt himself was alert to our picture of God needing to be more complex and inclusive than many people want it to be. Patten emailed me straight back thanking me for these suggestions. He said he was in the middle of reading a classic Russian novel – Dostoyevsky's 'The Idiot' (this didn't surprise me because Patten's tastes have always included the highbrow and technically difficult) – but he would look forward to working on my suggestions when he was through with 'The Idiot'....

This kind of made me wonder whether I was ‘the idiot’ for thinking my suggested readings would make an impact on such a sceptical, intellectual person: but, nevertheless, the die is cast. He has my suggestions. In turn I invited him to send me an essay he had written entitled ‘Grave meditations’ on happiness and the meaning of life as portrayed on gravestones! So I look forward to resuming our contact after Christmas. I hope to engage in constructive dialogue about the view he expresses in his essay on ‘living a good life’ – which refers to Aristotle and Greek classical thought, but makes no positive mention of God at all. And I will ask him for his reflections on Luke and Isaiah. My prayer is that, rather than be an Idiot, I may, in taking this initiative, have simply been a faithful ‘Fool for Christ’.

What, I wonder, have been your recent experiences of Going with God towards other people?

The ‘Sharing your faith’ house group that I have been part of on some Tuesday evenings this autumn has enabled more of these experiences to be shared. One person has described finding themselves in a café in Westbury-on-Trym and seeing another fairly regular customer sitting on their own looking miserable and in some distress. So she went over to this man, asked sensitively what was wrong and discovered that this man’s 43 year old brother had recently died. The subject of faith and church came up and our St Peter’s person found themselves commending Christian faith and recommending church going – especially at St Peter’s – naturally and easily. Who knows what seeds will have been sown by this unexpected encounter?

Or take another member of the group with younger friends in Sussex: a section of her book ‘**How to explain your faith**’ – which everyone has been recommended to read since September – is now marked with this younger friend’s name, so that his questions about God and suffering can be addressed through this St Peter’s resource. Can you, with me, see an unexpected pattern here? In exhorting everyone to read this book and begin to share their faith more intentionally, I, for one, imagined this would result in an upsurge of conversations with neighbours in Henleaze. Our house group experience, to give one instance, is surprisingly different. Members are finding ways to share Christian faith clearly – but the people we are sharing with are off and sometimes way off our normal patch! It’s a bit like Philip being transported to a desert road in Acts 8: suddenly we find ourselves being evangelists not in familiar, home territory but way ‘off-piste’ – in Surrey or Sussex, via telephone, email or in a café! God, as ever, is full of surprises!

The author who brings us the record of Philip going with faith to the Ethiopian court official on the road from Jerusalem to Egypt is also the writer of both our readings this morning. In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles Luke has Peter testifying that Jesus himself lived a life of ‘Going’ - going from God to Earth, going with healing and good news to all sorts of unlikely people, going back to God, providing the Holy Spirit to empower, to fire and fuel the mission of his followers. In the second reading, from Luke’s Gospel, we are taught and we should trust that when, as Caroline encouraged us, we, like the first disciples, actually experience what it’s like to take the good news to other people, we will find ourselves glad and empowered to do so, saying, as our Gospel this morning says ‘Peace to you...the kingdom of God has come near...is at hand **for you**’.

I myself have felt supported and empowered to take a number of faith sharing steps in recent weeks through the strength and support I receive from my autumn faith sharing group. When I haven’t been able to get to a meeting I have nevertheless told members of the group about it and asked for their prayer in relation to it. This, I am clear, is an example of the cross-pollination – the giving of interest and support to one another – that Sarah recommended last week. It really works – so, I urge you, try it!

So as we bring this series of sermons on St Peter’s Vision to an end, let’s note a few things:

What is our Vision? What do we discern God’s call to us to be? It’s about joining God in **transforming lives through following Christ in love and service**. We implement this with attention to knowing more about God, growing as disciples and going with God’s message of love towards other people. So let’s pray:

Gracious God, we thank you for information shared and insights gained over this sermon series. Inspire and equip us to know you better – not just with our heads but with our hearts and souls. Feed and nurture us to grow through looking to you and other people for food and spiritual sustenance. Disturb and motivate us to go towards other people with the good news of your love which has brought your kingdom of peace near to all in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.