

Vision Sermon Series 25th Nov: ‘TRY to implement our Vision: Trust, Risk, Yield’ by Mark Pilgrim

This is the first in a series of four sermons over the next four Sunday mornings through which we seek to embed St Peter’s Vision into the DNA of our life together as a community of Christians. Our Vision is now regularly set out in the top right hand corner of every weekly sheet under the St Peter’s logo. St Peter’s Vision – the way in which we respond to the question ‘what is God calling St Peter’s to?’ - let me remind you is: Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service.

So let’s face the challenge head on. What chance have we at St Peter’s of transforming lives through following Christ in love and service? For a start, it looks as if the Church of England communicating God’s Good News to people in this country will now be more rather than less difficult because of the vote of the General Synod on Tuesday. Many people will be less inclined to listen to what Church of England members have to say because of our current inability to enable women to fulfil their God-given potential – and be appointed bishops. As a member of General Synod myself, I attended the whole debate and participated in the vote. My prayer is that we can all learn something from those grim seven hours. In fact I want to suggest we can learn and apply something here at St Peter’s in relation to implementing our own Vision from that debate. Let me explain:

One speaker offered an image in their speech painting a vivid picture of the task facing Synod members. What the Synod motion invited the Synod to do was to take a step of faith. No, the solution offered to enabling women to become bishops wasn’t perfect. There are pro-women becoming bishops people who think the church should just say this is the case and those who don’t like it should make their own arrangements: and there are anti-women becoming bishops people who think that provision for ‘kosher’ male bishops should be written into law. What was being offered was a middle way between these two positions, giving parishes wanting alternative oversight a statutory right to have their request heard but leaving the exact details of the Code of Practice within which bishops would exercise a degree of discretion to a future date. What was being required of Synod members was a step of faith, an invitation to trust and a commitment to support each other as needs became apparent. The speaker in the debate invited members, if they could, to recall the scene from the Indiana Jones film where, in order to achieve his goal at the climax of the film, Indiana Jones has to jump across a chasm which is clearly too wide even for an Olympic long jumper. But our hero takes the risk. He steps – no, he leaps out in faith and, once he has shown his commitment, a rock bridge immediately extends from just below where he was standing – and he is then, and only then – able to reach his destination. It was sad, but, as the majority of Synod members were saying ‘Trust – risk – leap’ – go forward in faith and then you’ll find the support you are looking for, a minority of members were saying ‘We won’t take this step of faith: we’ve got to see the bridge is constructed according to our design before we risk moving an inch further’. They were ignoring the fact that the bridge only appears once the commitment to risk, once the step of faith has been taken. And we need to remember that, while the steps of faith and trust being invited may have struck some as being greater than the Austrian sky diver when he leapt into space from a record breaking 120,000 feet, in fact the leap is not into nothing at all but into the arms of God. God has been, is and will be there to support us all the way. If we don’t believe that what we’re living in is God’s world, if we don’t believe that what we are moving towards, taking steps of trust and faith, is towards and held by God, what are we doing as Christians? The Archbishop of Canterbury-designate, Justin Welby, put it in a nutshell when his appointment as Archbishop was confirmed. In his Appointment Statement he said: ‘I am utterly optimistic about the future of the church. We will certainly get things wrong, but the grace of God is far greater than our biggest failures.’ ... ‘the grace of God is far greater than all our failures’.

All these recent Anglican events take us to the heart of this morning’s Gospel passage. It’s relatively easy to remember the vivid image with which this passage starts: ‘Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven...it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’. What we tend to forget is the dialogue which follows: ‘Who then can be saved?’ ask the disciples. To which Jesus replies ‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible’. That is to say, I suggest, the well-being of the world and its future is ultimately in God’s hands: our and the world’s salvation depends on the grace of God - which is and will ultimately be sovereign over all our human desires and frailties.

The task of implementing St Peter's Vision, of transforming lives through following Christ in love and service, is one we need to see in this context. The work of transforming lives – other people's and, crucially, our own – is and will be the work of God, happening through the goodness and grace of God. Our task is to place ourselves in the stream of God's current and future activity. This is where the passage from Philippians comes in, encouraging us again to 'press on' in faith and commitment towards God revealed in Christ, accompanied and supported by his Spirit.

The challenge for us is to find a good balance between trusting confidently in God's pervasive activity and doing things ourselves to help rather than hinder God's will for the world. Do too much – and we risk our agenda becoming more important than God's: do too little and we risk God's kingdom not being fully extended and realised because its fulfilment includes fulfilling our human potential. So, here at St Peter's, our Vision leaflet, with its Knowing, Growing and Going centre spread, offers a path by which we might, as a Church, strike a good balance between trusting God too much and trusting God too little. Each of the three strands, with their outlining of what we will do to extend God's kingdom, contains encouragement to know God better, to grow in faith more and to step out in trust further. Unpacking the significance of these three strands is what the next three Sunday morning sermons will be about: please take every opportunity to absorb the teaching in them, both by attending the services in person and by reading and thinking about them later, either through copies available at the back of church or downloadable from our website.

For now I have this challenge to issue. I invite you to attempt three things this week – before the next sermon in this series is preached. I recommend we immerse ourselves in transforming lives through following Christ in love and service literally by TRYing. In each case the letters T R Y in 'trying' can stand for a particular action. T invites us to Trust; R invites us to Risk and Y ... well, we'll see what Y invites us to do in a minute.

Let's start with T for Trust. How about, in the days ahead, when you are thinking about God, praying and chewing things over in your mind asking for God's insight and assistance, how about simply upping the profile of your trust and confidence in God. Recall the Archbishop of Canterbury designate's Appointment Statement perhaps – how he draws attention to the need not to see ourselves as carrying the weight of the whole world on our shoulders, but trusting, being confident that the salvation of the world is in God's hands more than ours.

And then there's R for Risk. How about, in the days ahead before you hear or read the next sermon, risking something for God – taking a small step or a giant leap of faith. Is there, for instance, a person or a situation you are aware of that would benefit from an unexpected but helpful intervention or contribution from you? Take a moment now to think and reflect on this – who or what could you risk helping? PAUSE

And finally there's the 'Y' in T R Y 'try'. Here I'm glad to have followed Brenda Sumner's friend, Fiona's suggestion to read the '45 lessons for a good life' by a writer called Regina Brett that Brenda herself found encouraging and helpful in fuelling her Christian discipleship. The shortest lesson of all, number 44, is the single word 'Yield'. Initially it sounds old fashioned and not necessarily relevant. But in the spiritual context in which the 45 lessons are written, and in the Christian context in which we here at St Peter's are engaged, Y for Yield has much to commend it. It brings to my mind the phrase 'not my will - but yours be done' ... May my priorities yield, O Lord, to your priorities. It brings to mind that phrase in the Lord's Prayer 'Your will be done, on earth as in heaven' ... In the days ahead, before you hear or read the next sermon in this series, I recommend and urge you to try 'yielding' to God. This will necessarily involve you in identifying and acknowledging your relationship with God. How do you stand in relation to God... where do you stand viz a viz God at the moment: are you close or far apart? Are you tall or short when you compare yourself with the size of God? What room, what opportunities have you got – will you take – to 'yield', to recognise God's presence and put yourself in right relationship to God – today, tomorrow and for the rest of this week?

Let's end with this prayer: Lord may we implement St Peter's Vision of transforming lives through following Christ in love and service by truly TRYing – Trusting, Risking and Yielding as you would have us do. Amen.