

## Our Vision

*A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on the Fifth Sunday of Trinity 12 July 2020 – his last as Vicar of St Peter's Wolvercote prior to retirement.*

Five years ago, I preached my first sermon here, on the subject of our vision. I began with the opening words of Isaiah 55: *"Come to the waters. You that have no money, come buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."*

It's a wonderful simple message of the good news of "Grace" - that is, God's generous, free, unconditional love, inviting us into his presence. So I was delighted to find that for my last Sunday, the readings begin with the closing words of the very same chapter. Here are some extracts: *"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth...*

*For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace... Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle...."*

Beautiful words of promise and hope – very appropriate for the day we are holding our first Sunday service at St Peter's since March, even though sadly there are many of you who will not be able to be there. Going back five years ago, that first Sunday here I spoke about our simple vision statement at St Peter's: *"Coming closer to God and celebrating his loving purposes. Reaching out unconditionally, showing God's love for all creation."*

That vision statement was one of the many things that first drew me to this parish. And although the *"Shaping our Vision"* process has now come to an end, and it will soon be time to develop a new vision with a new vicar, I want to revisit that vision statement one last time today. Because it is good, and I want to restate it, and maybe sharpen it up a little after the experience of the last five years.

*Coming closer to God* – this is where it always begins. One thing perhaps Jesus shows us above all, is that with God, we always start personal. And it was always this way, since the story first begins, in Genesis, with the call of Abraham.

C.S.Lewis comments on how very significant it is that the story doesn't begin with philosophy or theology, but with relationship. The story begins with God's personal relationship with a family – Abraham, and his wife Sarah, and his family, his son and grandsons, and great grandchildren, and how they discover God leading them and guiding them through all the ups and downs in their lives. It is very personal. The philosophy and theology can come later.

And so it is with us. Christian faith is not about knowing *about* God, it is about *knowing* God. And each one of us is invited to *come closer to God*.

As we seek to come closer to God, whether through our personal prayer, or through our worship, or through exploring spirituality, remember that God is not passively waiting for us, but is actively involved – indeed I believe that it is actually his Holy Spirit who is drawing us. St James says in his letter: *"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."* (James 4 v 8)

This is surely an understatement. Remember how, when the prodigal son walks hesitantly along the road back to his father's house, his father, far from waiting, runs down the road to meet him! And so surely, as we walk, perhaps tentatively, maybe a little fearfully, maybe doubtfully along the

way to God, we find that God is rushing to meet us – because he cannot wait to embrace us in his warm and welcoming arms!

A song I heard recently say this about Jesus: *“I have seen the fire in your eyes of love, with passion they are fixed on me...”* Striking words, but they ring true with the picture of Jesus we see in the gospels, and the God he reveals to us – a God of burning fiery compassionate love.

We often talk about stillness, peace and silence in prayer and worship – and these things are important in helping us to reduce distraction and focus more clearly. But don't let this misled you – what these things lead us to is the warm and passionate fire of God's love.

This leads us naturally on to celebration - as our vision statement puts it - *celebrating God's loving purposes*. I love the picture of the Father welcoming his prodigal son home on the road. But that is not where the story ends. The Father wastes no time in preparing a celebration – a Feast! I am glad that in this parish we believe in celebrating our faith – that we are never afraid of colour in our worship – and though we are quiet at this time, that is unusual – we love to sing and we enjoy beautiful music! Whether we are in the sombre seasons of Lent and Advent, or the seasons of celebration – Christmas and Easter – whether in joy or sorrow – the brightness of our liturgical colours beautifully expresses these different moods. It is good to have the contrasts of joy and sorrow, in solidarity with the joys and sorrows in the world around us – whether it is the seriousness of Advent leading to the joy of Christmas, or the sadness of Holy Week leading to the even greater joy of Easter, leading on in turn to the excitement of Pentecost.

It is good to celebrate – just as the Father celebrated the homecoming of his son with a great feast. There is one part of that story I only recently noticed. The last part of the story mentions the elder son approaching the house and hearing music and dancing. At this point in the story, our attention moves to the elder son – and so I had never noticed what is mentioned in passing here – that the Feast ends in music and dancing! Now I've always been very diffident when it comes to dancing – so don't worry, I'm not suggesting dancing in our worship! But there is something here about letting our hair down a bit. And I think there is a case for an attitude of exuberance rather than too much solemnity. I love our monthly Family Communions, not only because the children and young people and young families are involved, important as that is – but also because these are services where we let our hair down a bit. And I think it is important that the colour and excitement of our worship are not purely external but are matched by something of the joy of the Spirit within us.

So I hope that our tradition of celebration will continue in this parish – and that with it there will increasingly be a joy in the Spirit also. *“Coming closer to God and celebrating his loving purposes”* – the fire of love, and the joy in the Spirit – these things must never be inward looking but must lead us to look out in love to the world around us.

This leads to the second part of our vision statement: *Reaching out unconditionally, showing God's love for all creation*. A month ago I talked of reaching out to the community around us, and of sharing the beautiful message of the unconditional love of God with our community around us. Our gospel reading today gives us a vivid picture of *reaching out unconditionally* – as the sower scatters his seed freely on every kind of ground – the path, the rocky ground, and the thorny soil, as well as the good soil, not worrying what response there will be, and how much of his work will be wasted. That is a good example for us to follow – seeking to spread the love of God in our community, in every way we can, and in every place we can. This is our primary calling, as a local community parish church.

But what I most like in this vision statement is the all-encompassing breadth of our vision – *showing God's love for all creation*. The culture of our world is at present becoming more insular and inward looking. I believe it is important that we don't collude with this, but that we make sure our vision is wider. In my first sermon here, I drew attention to the Paris Climate summit, which took place just a week later. As the issue of Climate Change has become more urgent, I believe it is vital that we keep reminding ourselves that the Christian Gospel has never been limited in its scope, but is about the renewal and the restoration of the whole of Creation. This can encourage us first never to tire of prayer and action to address this huge and ever-growing challenge. And secondly it can reassure us that we are not alone – that the healing of Creation is God's work, and is part of the Gospel, and part of the message of the Kingdom of God.

In other ways too, we are called to be part of this big vision. At this present time it is right for us to be concerned about containing the coronavirus in our country, and in our community. But it was salutary to hear in the news, that while our cases here are going down, overall in the world the pandemic is still growing fast. And we need to pray for places like Brazil and South Africa – and other poorer countries that are even more vulnerable.

I love this vision statement because it goes from the small and the personal out to that huge all inclusive vision of the healing and restoration of all of God's Creation. And as we grow in our personal experience of the passionate fiery love of God, we will also feel called both to share in the sadness of the world, in solidarity with all who are mourning, and also to celebrate the amazing hope that God has given us in this beautiful gospel – unashamed to be exuberant and full of the joy of the Spirit - never taking ourselves too seriously, but full of fun, full of laughter, full of the joy of living.

**Amen**