

Our Vision at St. Peter's

The first sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper as newly-appointed Vicar of Wolvercote and Wytham on 22 November 2015 at St Peter's Wolvercote 10.00am service

First of all, once again a huge thank you to you all for giving us such a wonderful welcome to the parish on Thursday night. What a wonderful service. And all my family here felt very warmly welcomed – thank you!

It is an exciting time to be starting here – the Sunday before Advent – what we used to call “Stir up” Sunday (I’ve seen the children with wooden spoons – I think they’re stirring up something this morning!) and of course now the Sunday we celebrate Christ the King. And next week we begin the Advent season itself.

The themes of Advent and of Christ the King seem so relevant after those dreadful events in Paris last weekend. The Advent hope – and the Advent imagery of light shining in the darkness – and today, that Gospel reading that talks of Jesus as a very different kind of King – a king who is very clear he never ever wanted his followers to fight for him, but who would rule purely through the power of love.

And that leads me to what I have wanted to talk about today. One of the many things that first drew me to this parish was your vision statement – a statement I could 100% identify with – and one thing I have learned over the years is how very important it is to share a vision together. I wonder how familiar you are with our Vision Statement? Well to remind us – here it is. Our aim and our vision is:

- *Coming closer to God and celebrating his loving purposes*
- *Reaching out unconditionally, showing God's love for all creation*

I want to start with the second – *reaching out unconditionally, showing God's love for all creation*. For me, *unconditional* is the key word here. At the heart of the Christian Gospel is the message of “Grace” – that is, God’s generous, free, unconditional love for us all. Love we can never earn, because we don’t need to - it is already given. God who loves us not because we are good, but because He is good. As our first reading says:

Come to the waters. You that have no money, come buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

God’s love is free, unconditional. And this is not just an escape clause for a favoured few – I believe this is God’s fundamental attitude to all humanity – no exceptions, no compromise, no one excluded.

This is good news! – but funnily enough, it’s not an easy message, because it means we are called to have the same attitude to others. In one way, it’s almost easier to believe in a judgemental God, because it means then you can be judgemental to others. But if we believe in the unconditional love of God, then we are called to reach out with unconditional love for each other and for those around us. Love – not for any payback, not for anything we can get in return, but purely for what we can give.

Reaching out unconditionally – showing God's love for all creation. And that means - All Creation.

I love those words in our second reading – in my opinion one of St Paul’s most inspired passages, where St Paul catches a glimpse of the limitless scope of God’s salvation.

The Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

All Creation included in God’s loving purposes – God’s plan to heal and restore his world. All Creation! That’s why I passionately believe that world issues – Peace, poverty, social justice, climate change – these are not optional extras for Christians – they are at the heart of our message of God’s salvation.

Right now that is particularly relevant. Many of you will know that tomorrow week, leaders will start to converge in Paris for the two week climate summit. This could be a critical moment for the future of our world. And so I invite you to pray - if you share this vision, maybe we could try to pray, every day, for the next three weeks for this Climate Summit. Pray that Paris this year might be remembered not for the terrorist attacks but as a place of hope. And

through our prayers we can all play our small part in God's great work of bringing liberation and healing to his Creation.

And of course creation is not just the big world out there – it's also right here around us - our own parish – our own community – and all the people around us. And right here we are called to be a loving Christian presence – showing God's love in all that we are and all that we do.

That's perhaps the biggest challenge of all. And this is why we need the other part of our Vision Statement – *Coming closer to God and celebrating his loving purposes*. Because none of this is possible unless we are growing closer to God. I am very glad to say that we are not called to manufacture our own love for those around us, by sheer will power – rather, we are called to be channels of God's love. We are not called to imitate God's love by our own efforts, but rather to receive God's love, and overflow with God's love to others.

So I am glad that exploring our spirituality is a priority here – deepening our prayer and our stillness. How important that is, and I look forward to us exploring it much more together.

And I am also glad that worship is such a priority here and so highly valued – especially Communion – drawing close to God and receiving his love given unconditionally to us even as we receive the gifts of bread and wine. I am glad that we have those moments of stillness in our worship – those moments which help to make sure that our worship is never about performance but always about encounter – encounter with God. In our worship we hope to create a kind of sacred centre, a sacramental space in which all of us, in our own way, wherever we are on our spiritual journey, can encounter the living God.

Our worship is like the burning bush, where Moses drew near and met with God. "Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground". When I was on Sabbatical a few years ago, I spent some time in Ethiopia and had the privilege of joining in prayer in Ethiopian Orthodox churches – they take off their shoes to go into church in Ethiopia! Now I'm not suggesting that as a liturgical innovation – but maybe as an attitude of heart and mind?

This is something special. As Thomas Merton put it:

"Sink from your shallows, soul, into eternity, And slake your wonder at that deep-lake spring."

Just before moving in here, I found myself imagining a picture that maybe our worship and our church life here could be like a still lake of sparkling water, where all who feel weary, dry and dusty can find refreshment.

But our Vision Statement doesn't just say *Coming closer to God*. It also says – *celebrating God's loving purposes*.

Celebration – what a good place to finish – I'm so glad you included that! I am glad that we have a sense of celebration here – that we are not afraid to have lots of colour in our worship. It's good to remember why we worship on a Sunday – because every Sunday is Easter Day. As we share Communion we remember not just Jesus' last meal before he died – but also his first meal after the resurrection – with those two disciples in Emmaus. And it seems to me that just as the church bells at the beginning of the service ring out to proclaim the presence of God in our community, so that bell that rings at the end of the Eucharistic prayer for me proclaims the presence of the risen Christ here amongst us. Like those magical words in Luke 24 at Emmaus – "they recognised him in the breaking of the bread" – and so we still do today.

And however bad life gets in this world, the presence of the risen Jesus gives us hope. In him we see that Love will win, in the end, over all hatred, violence and fear. In those famous words of Julian of Norwich "All shall be will, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".

So I like a church life that has a sense of celebration - that is full of fun, full of laughter, full of joy in life. A lightness of touch – never taking ourselves too seriously. We are an Easter people – Alleluia is our song.

To sum up, again our vision is

- *Coming closer to God - and celebrating his loving purposes*
- *Reaching out unconditionally - showing God's love for all creation*

Thank you for that Vision statement – I love it! And I look forward to exploring all this with you far far more, in the months and the years to come. That for me, is an exciting prospect! Thank you.