



Expressing our Vision

St Paul's Vision – Jan 2021

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1. Context – why talk about vision now?

Back in March last year, in what seems like a different (pre-Lockdowns) world, the PCC spent a day together in the beautiful surroundings of Southwell in order to try to discern what God was saying to St Paul's about our vision and direction.

I thought that this day was productive and inspiring, and we definitely came away with a sense that St Paul's was called to be right **'at the centre' of our community**. We felt that this meant 'in practical ways', but also in ways that were a sign of the presence and love of God. We also felt that the church, as the only public building (apart from shops!) in our parish, could be a place where we invited people to gather, and where people could hopefully encounter something generous and inviting; something of the love of God.

We also felt called to pay close attention to our **spiritual foundations** and to the **vulnerabilities and needs of the community** around us.

It was always my intention to return to the discussions we had on the day in Southwell, and to use them to form the basis of a 'vision statement' for St Paul's. However, the Covid lockdown intervened a little, and it was only in the Autumn that the PCC got together to consider and approve a new way of expressing our vision here at St Paul's. This 'new way of expressing' our vision is the document that you are currently reading, and particularly the **Vision** and **Values** that it will discuss later!

This vision document, therefore, is rooted in the discussions which the PCC started back in March, but sets those discussions in the wider context of a more fully considered and expressed vision. A vision that we could possibly stand by, as a church, for a number of years.

The 'vision statement' that it represents is intended to be broad enough to hold all the different aspects of church life 'under its wing' (as it were) but also clear enough to inspire and guide us, as a church, in the months and even years ahead, as we attempt to be a distinctive, vibrant and growing community in this place.

But why now? As I write, we are currently at the beginning of another lockdown and we are still in the midst of the struggle against the Coronavirus that has disrupted so much of our daily lives. Perhaps it seems like a strange time to be talking about vision. However, I do think that, absorbed as we quite rightly are with the struggles and griefs of this time, we can usefully and prayerfully consider the future, and what it is God is inviting us to build and grow here at St Paul's. Perhaps thinking of such things will even encourage us to hope and to expect, and to pray.

I invite you to read what follows, and to prayerfully consider how you too can be part of growing God's kingdom and building God's church in this place.



2. Why do we need a 'vision'?

Good question! I have been involved in vision processes in a good few churches over the years, and one thing they often seem to do is to try to find a simple, one sentence 'vision statement' that expresses their theology and purpose – or the purpose and theology of the leadership at the time – in a clear and concise way. Such statements need to be broad enough as to be uncontentious, but also encompass some sense of the Church's mission. This has always seemed to me to be a lot of 'heavy-lifting' for one sentence to do! The result is often inspiring but vague. For example a Church, of which I used to be a member, used this statement:

'Bringing the community to life'.

Very nice, perhaps, on first glance, but a little further thought raises the question of whether that particular community knew it was being 'brought to life' (it didn't – the church was very insular!) and whether or not they minded!

I am joking (at least a little), but this vision statement was not particularly *inviting* or even particularly clear as to what it meant *in practice*. It actually might even have sounded a little arrogant! (as if the community was 'dead' and only the church could 'bring it to life!'). But of course it was, in truth, more of a 'strapline' or 'slogan' than a thought-through statement of what the church was about.

A more basic point, however, about church 'vision statements' is whether they are needed at all. I mean, doesn't the Church of God already have a vision? Isn't Revelation 21 (the great vision at the end of the Bible of the world made right, and healed) or even the much mis-used Matthew 28 (The 'Great' Commission) enough of a vision for any church?

I would suggest that they are! (and I will say more about those two bits of scripture later).

For me, the real purpose of a church's *vision* is not to say *what* the church community wants to do in the broadest sense (because such scriptures as above say that better than any vision statement ever could) but rather to say something of *how* they intend to do it in a way that is relevant to their context. And then to provide a helpful framework against which to assess whether they *are* actually doing it, and whether they are doing it in the right way. This is what this vision document will attempt to do.

A church's 'vision' should be able to be used as a measure against which the activities of the church can be formed, held up and questioned.

Having said that, I will try not to ignore questions of *what* the church is here to do, and neither will I refuse to consider the advantage of having a simple 'strapline' or 'slogan' that expresses some of this to the wider community.

If you wish, you could skip to those parts of the document now (parts 4-8). But if you are up for a bit of background context that informs the following vision statement, read on and let's talk theology!



3. Theological background of our vision...

I think that it is important for the church to broadly agree on the theological basis of what we are hoping to do. We must always, I would suggest, root our thinking in the Bible and the Christian tradition!

With this in mind, I will now offer some theological reflection, based upon three passages of scripture (including the two mentioned above). I will use these passages to suggest a theological background to our vision, and one that will *inform* and help *shape* this vision here at St Paul's.

I will use the passages to answer three broad questions, relating to our vision. The questions are these:

1. **What is God doing on Earth?**
2. **How is God doing it?**
3. **How do we respond?**

And so to our first question...

What is God doing on Earth? Revelation 21.1-6

Revelation 21.1-6 is a fabulous, mystical passage right from the very end of the Bible. In it the writer recounts a vision he has seen of a 'new heaven and a new earth'. This might be good moment to read it through (it's not very long) and if you don't have a bible to hand you can always search for it on the internet!

The incredible thing about Revelation 21 is that it holds a vision of the 'final destination' of the world, based upon the fulfilment of God's rescue plan for the whole world. It speaks of God's victory over darkness and evil, and an ultimate restoration of 'Eden' with a promise that:

'the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his Peoples, and God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...'
(Rev 21.3-4)

It goes on to remind us that God's plan is to 'make all things new' and that God is the 'Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'.

In simple terms, what this says to me is that God's mission for the world is to bring it to complete and utter restoration. To 'make all things new'. To 'wipe every tear'. And it also reminds us that this is *God's* plan; God who is the beginning and end of all, and that it is certainly not our idea, or even ultimately our responsibility. It is a plan rooted in eternity. It shows us that God's mission is so big and so extraordinary that it really can't be limited to our own ideas of what the world needs, or doesn't need at any particular time. So if we are to be part of *God's* vision to bring ultimate healing and restoration to the world, then we need to remember how big and how *broad* that vision is: every tear on the face of every person in the world, every act of injustice or oppression, every moment of unpleasantness from the tiniest inconsideration to the atrocities committed by nations stands under this vision, and is 'earmarked' for redemption.

It is certainly not a vision that stops at the door of a church! Although we would always want to assert that faith in Jesus is the 'doorway' to God's salvation and plan, God's vision and mission is not to make people 'believe' in Jesus and just stop there! As Christians, I think that the best way of understanding ourselves is as agents of this big vision of Salvation; agents of restoration and redemption.

As Christians, held under this vision, we are people who are joining in with God's plan of healing and hope in ourselves and in the world.



As Christians, held under this vision, we are agents of Heaven, tasked with making (as the Lord's prayer put's it) God's 'Kingdom come', and God's 'will be done, on earth as in heaven'.

As Christians, held under this vision, there can be no problem or pain on earth too small for us to ignore (See Mt 10.42!), and no pattern of injustice too big for us to imagine a way to bring change. God's vision is huge, all-encompassing and eternal; and we are called to be part of it!

The final point I would make about this passage from Revelation is that it reminds us that God is the 'Alpha and Omega', and so the 'Author and Perfector' of our faith (as St Paul put it), and that **it is God we must seek, experience and encounter (as the writer of the book of Revelation did) in order to be drawn up into God's vision.**

This experience of and encounter *with* God is essential, I would suggest, to all that follows!

How is God doing it? Matthew 28.19-20

Earlier on, I used the phrase 'much mis-used' when mentioning the 'Great Commission' of Matthew 28.19-20. This might be good moment to read this short bit of scripture again, although I'm sure the words are pretty familiar to most Christians. So why do I claim that it is 'much mis-used'...? Well, I would suggest that it is often read (and preached upon) as if it says:

'Go therefore and make Christians of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Well, it doesn't say that. What it actually says is:

*'Go therefore and make **disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...***

As I hinted above, there can be a big difference between someone who believes in Jesus, and a disciple of Jesus. Would not even the Devil believe in Jesus? (and tremble!). The point I am making is this: **God's plan to bring about Salvation on earth is to bring people to be disciples of Jesus!**

We can certainly believe in Jesus (and even call ourselves Christian) without being a disciple of Jesus. In Jesus' time a disciple was literally someone who 'followed in the way' of their teacher. A disciple aimed to become like their teacher in every single way! A disciple viewed their purpose in life as to journey with (literally – walking closely beside) their teacher until they became just like them.

I believe – I completely and passionately believe – that the world would be changed by Christians deciding to actually 'walk in the ways of Jesus' and obeying his commandments such as 'Love your neighbour as yourself' and 'Love your enemies'. Although commandments such as these are costly and difficult to follow, we do believe that we are helped by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that becoming more like Jesus is a lifetime's journey, in which we don't have to go straight for the most difficult and costly parts!

Whatever else a church does, it must be a place where people can be encouraged, equipped, and enabled to explore what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus, in their context, today.

It must be a place where people can be challenged and equipped to finish the sentence 'Because I am a follower of the way of Jesus, I....'



It must be a place where to 'Follow the way of Jesus' means practical, simple and possible things that we can do to imitate Jesus, as we journey with him along the path of discipleship. Becoming people who follow the ways of Jesus will, without any doubt, change the world around us!

How do we respond? 1 Corinthians 12.12-13

It is often suggested that 'division' was one of the first fruits of the 'fall' in the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. As soon as the fated apple was eaten, Adam and Eve became aware of and embarrassed by their physical differences – a distance had been put between them and they became aware of each other as 'other' than themselves. They were divided! What followed next was expulsion from the Garden, as distance was now put between them and God. More division!

In the continuing narrative of the Bible, this distance and division between individuals soon widens to include all sorts of murderous and divisive behaviour, and perhaps eventually finds its fullest expression in the exile of God's people from their promised land, divided and 'cut-off' even from God; that is, from the presence of God in the Hebrew temple.

St Paul wrote some extraordinary passages in his letters describing how Jesus is God's way of reversing this process of division. Particularly in Ephesians 1, where he wrote of God gathering 'all things together' in Jesus, all 'things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1.7-10).

The passage I want to focus on though, when I consider how we respond to *what* God is doing, and *how* God is doing it, is actually in another of Paul's letters; his first letter to the Corinthians.

Here, in a very famous passage in chapter 12 (Verses 12-13 if you fancy having a read!) he talks about the fact that as we come to Christ, as we become followers of the Way of Jesus, we become incorporated into the **Body of Christ**. Paul seems to be saying that the extraordinary and deep divisions that existed in the culture of his time, between free citizens and slaves, between Jews and Non-Jews, would melt away as we all drew closer to Jesus, and became part of this new 'body'.

For Paul, and for the very first Christians (see the book of Acts, chapter 2!), it was clear that people were to respond to the work of God in the world and in them ***in and through community***.

It is very difficult for us to grasp, such a long time later, how extraordinary it would have been to see people overcoming such huge differences of status and class and culture and becoming an authentic community of mutual support and mutual care. But this is of course what we see, and those passages in Acts which talk about the believers sharing everything (until there was no need left amongst them) are still extraordinary and challenging to read today!

It is clear that Christians are supposed to be people who are engaged in community with each other; in authentic community which allows for a deep level of trust and support.

The way I see it is this: as we all draw closer to Jesus, approaching him who is the centre from different directions, we draw closer to each other as we draw closer to the centre. The different directions that we approach from might be differences in status, upbringing, ethnicity, skin colour, political views or anything else that divides us these days. But as we all draw closer to Jesus, these differences cease to divide us, and we draw closer to each other as well.

And not only that, but **as we draw closer together, our mutual love and care for each in community testifies to the world that Jesus is real**. As the writer of the gospel of John put it 'by your love for each other will they know you are mine'. (John 13.35).



Summing up...

So, to sum up I would say that our vision as a church must reflect some of the theology I have considered above.

I would suggest that it is important that St Paul's can be a place where people can encounter the vision, the presence and love of God for them and the world, be inspired by this, and to be filled with the Spirit of God as the 'Alpha and Omega' and 'Author and Perfectioner of our faith.

I would suggest that it is important for St Paul's to be a place where people can explore what it means for them to be a disciple; a follower of the way of Jesus. For a world full of followers of Jesus will change the world.

I would suggest that it is important for St Paul's to be a place where people can engage with an authentic, Christ-centred community. It is in that community that we can all find hope and support, and through which we can witness to the world about Jesus.

And that leads us to consider expressing this as a vision... Please read on!



4. The parts of our vision. Vision, Values and Initiatives

After saying above that a vision statement should represent *how* we as a church intend to participate in God's great vision of salvation and redemption, I want to suggest that we could usefully separate *how* we are joining in with this vision, at this time, into 3 parts.

These 3 parts follow on from each other. They are as follows:

1. **Vision,**
2. **Values**
3. **Initiatives.**

In what follows, **Vision** will describe **WHAT** our focus is on, in broad terms, as we participate in God's mission in this time and in our own context.

Values will try to describe **HOW** and in what ways we go about doing the things we are focussing on.

And **Initiatives** will list what exactly we are doing, here and now.

So, onto Vision...



5. Vision Statement

Therefore, our vision is that St Paul's can be a place where people can:

Experience the presence and vision of God in their lives, through worship, prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Explore what it means for them to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Engage with an authentic and loving community, where divisions and differences are overcome.

Or to put it more succinctly:

At St Paul's our vision is to be a place where people can:

Experience God.
Explore discipleship.
Engage with community.

Or even simpler still:

Experience.
Explore.
Engage.

I believe that this statement will be able to act as a useful 'yardstick' to guide and inspire us about what exactly we intend to offer or to create here at St Paul's. Any of the three versions above could be used to express this vision, depending on the context!



6. Values

In seeking to pursue this vision, we will aim to use the following 6 key Distinctive Values:

Invitation.
Grace.
Generosity.
Celebration.
Inclusion.
Safety.

For simplicity, these could be grouped together as follows...

Invitation & Grace
Generosity & Celebration
Inclusion & Safety.

I should point that these values could not, of course, represent an exhaustive list of everything that matters to us here at St Paul's. Many other words could be suggested, no doubt. However, these words seem to me to represent useful 'yardsticks' against which we can measure what we offer at St Paul's, either inside the church or in the wider community. More specifically, these values might help us consider **how what we offer feels to those with whom we engage.**

I will not, here, spend time describing the process of reflection that has led to these 6 particular values. However, rest assured that there has been a process of reflection!

I do not wish to suggest that any words or values that might be felt to be missing from the list are unimportant in any way. Rather I might want to suggest that if a particular word or value (such as, for example, 'Love') is felt to be 'missing', it might already be expected to present in all that we do as a matter of course!

These values, I would suggest, are usefully distinctive, and perhaps even a little surprising. I would be happy to talk more about them, but for now I will simply add a short explanation below:

- **Invitation**

God is a God of invitation, and a God of grace. God does not force us to come to God, or to develop in our walk with Jesus, but always invites us into more. Therefore, I want us to be a people of invitation; who are deliberate and intentional about inviting others to *Experience God, Explore Faith, and Engage with Community.*

- **Grace**

At the same time, if the invitation is not taken up, God's grace is limitless and boundless. Therefore I want us to be a people who are full of grace, reflecting the God of boundless grace, who does not force or compel, but lovingly offers grace to all.



- **Generosity**

I want us to be a people of generosity; people who are generous in giving and sharing their care, time and financial resources in a way that witnesses to the God of abundance. I want us to be known and perceived as a generous presence in our community in order to offer this witness to our generous God.

- **Celebration**

I want us to be a people of celebration; people that celebrate God, celebrate each other, celebrate the good we see in the world. This sense of celebration is rooted in our eternal hope and is distinctive and counter-cultural in our culture and society.

- **Inclusion**

But this celebration must be inclusive to all! I want us to be a people of inclusion; to be a church where people find that they can be welcomed and included no matter what their age, social status, skin colour, disability, education or sexuality is.

- **Safety**

Finally, I want us to be a community of safety – we must take seriously the requirement that all must be safe to Experience, Explore and Engage with us. 'All are welcome *in safety*' needs to be our understanding. We cannot, and should not feel we have to, welcome individuals who would pose a danger to others into our community without mitigating that danger. Safeguarding must be the responsibility of all of us.

I genuinely believe that a community that exhibits these qualities will be a growing, attractive and vibrant community of faith.

Therefore, I would encourage us to be able to use the values above to ask questions of all our activities or initiatives. Questions such as these:

Does it feel inviting?

Will it seem generous?

Will it feel safe?

Who will it exclude?

And also to be able to enquire of ourselves in a similar way: 'Am I being gracious?', 'am I being generous' and so on...



7. Initiatives

Having considered our Vision and our Values, we turn finally to our initiatives. The idea being that they are derived from the vision and values above. It should be possible, at least eventually, to group all of our activities or initiatives under the 3 word vision statement explained above. For example:

Experience:

Worship services.

Explore:

Seeker Courses (e.g. 'Alpha').

Engage:

Places of Welcome.

Why not take a moment to think of some of our activities and initiatives here at St Paul's, and consider which title you would group them under? Are there any which don't seem to be a good fit with any of the above categories?



8. 'Slogan' or 'Strapline'. Our message to the wider community.

After considering all of the above, I would like to return to the idea of finding a way to express some of our vision in a way that would be simple and easy to understand for the community around us.

Here I would want to draw a distinction between the vision that would be offered and described to the church community, as explained at length above, and a welcoming message that might be addressed to the wider community.

I do not necessarily think that these two 'messages' are easy to bring together into one sentence. Even the very simple 3 word version of the vision related above (Experience, Explore, Engage) does not actually carry a simple message that is easily understood from outside the church. But of course, it is not trying to do this, for the reasons explained in section 2!

Therefore I think it is entirely sensible and quite wise to use a 'slogan' that is different to this 3 word vision, but entirely in keeping with it.

So what should such a 'slogan' be like? Well, our simple message to the wider community needs to be intelligible; in other words, instantly understandable. It needs to convey a sense of openness and invitation. It needs to express a sense that if that invitation is taken up, a warm welcome will be received, and it needs – I believe – to avoid the trap that the slogan mentioned in section 2 fell into, which is to give the impression that 'we' are here to try to 'do' something to 'you'. Rather it needs to express humility; to give the impression that 'we are here to serve you'!

We might go further and ask that a slogan would also be able to measure up against the values expressed above.

After considering all of these factors, I have to say that I consider that our current slogan will fit very nicely indeed with this new vision:

'Your Church in the Community'

This, to me, nicely expresses invitation, generosity and openness. It gives the impression that 'we' are here for 'you' and feels welcoming. Also, and of course, it includes the word *community*, which is always a good thing! I am very happy to continue using it and commend it to you all!



9. Conclusion

Thank you for reading this far, I know that this has been a long document!

However, I do think that having a vision that guides us and helps us to shape what we offer; that is clearly understandable, and easy to express, will be very important in the future.

I believe that it will help us focus what we are doing on that which is central to our vision and mission, and therefore enable us to participate in what God is doing in our community.

The vision I have described above places relationship with God, discipleship and community at the heart of who we are. I hope that it will serve us well as we journey together into more of what God has for us as St Paul's. I am looking forward to journeying on with you all, to grow in my own discipleship, and to see you, and others, grow in yours.

May I ask you again to prayerfully consider this document, and to consider how you can be part of putting it into practice.

Every blessing to you!

Tim

7th January 2021