

FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Church and Community

Bible Readings: 1 Cor 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Theme: Vision Day

Today is Vision Day, that day when, at the start of the year, we remind ourselves who God is and who he wants us to be.

Vision is defined as the imagining of a preferred future. It says that things as they are may be OK, but that the future could look rather different. Where we are now may have been fit for purpose then but, in a rapidly changing world, we need to think differently, speak differently and act differently. And not all of us find that kind of change easy.

Let me tell you about our spoons ... over Christmas we had guests. When they left Kathryn decided that we need to have a bit of a tidy up in the kitchen. She moved the spoons from here to there in the cutlery drawer. Breakfast is my favourite meal of the day and I use one of these spoons every morning for my breakfast. Every morning since this radical change has been made, I have gone to reach for the spoons where they used to be. I am finding change difficult and it is taking time for me to get used to it all.

Spoons are one thing. A distance of possible 6 inches is not a great distance to travel ... our vision for a changing church in a changing world may be a little more

demanding. And holding on to who God is in that change process is vitally important.

As many of you will know I am running a trip to Greece in May with my friend Derek from St James' Church, Hampton Hill. It's not too late to join us if this is something you might find attractive!! What we will see when we get there is a fascinating history of people seeking for something beyond themselves. People realising that this is not all there is in life and wanting to reach out and touch something bigger and something more.

As we travel around from north to south we will see how Paul will have encountered the ancient tradition of Greek mythology. The Greeks imagined or invented a whole narrative of gods, their families and their dealing with people. This story is illustrated in the most amazing art, sculpture and architecture. And we will see lots of it.

What we need to remember is that none of it is real. It's invented. It's made up. It's the product of a fertile and creative culture in which people kind of knew they needed God, but found themselves looking in the wrong place.

Paul, writing to the Corinthian Christians, says this:

vv1-3

when you were pagans you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak

Paul in his preaching and teaching in Greece would have been surrounded by images of gods which do not exist and

people following philosophies which made no real sense. Into this extraordinary context, he speaks of Jesus as Lord.

And he identifies this as the work of the Spirit:

and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

What Paul realised from very early on in his dramatic meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, was that Jesus replaced, exceeded, and dare I say it “trumped” any other god or emperor or image.

The thought is that when Christians were persecuted, attempts were made to have them say “Jesus is cursed”. We know of this same tactic in modern day terrorist activity and persecution. And, of course, many Christians, then as now, lived and died refusing to bow the knee, refusing to bend to this lie, this untruth, this fabrication, this denial, because they knew Jesus to be the way, the truth, the life. They knew him to be the Lord. Their vision of God was clear – manifested and made known in the face of his son, Jesus Christ.

This is what is going in John’s gospel, where the disciples see the water become wine. It’s not a magic trick. It’s not a fantastic catering scam. It’s the first sign by which Jesus makes himself known. John says in v11:

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

People saw who Jesus was and what he was about and they believed in him. They began to say “Jesus is Lord”. More important to me than any graven image, any false god or any earthly emperor or ruler. Jesus is the one I will give my life to and maybe even give my life for, if push comes to shove.

And there are those of us here in church this morning who can tell a similar story. That, by different routes and in different ways, we have come to that place where we know for ourselves that Jesus is Lord, that he is the one who really matters, that he is the one we follow. In terms of the Alpha conversations we have started again this week: he is the roadmap to guide us through life, the reality in a world of confusion and the radical one who models and calls us also to a radical lifestyle of surrender and sacrifice.

What a picture to hold before us as we start the new year. What a vision of who God is, the Lord of all the world. Let’s think now about who he might want us to be and the part he might want us to play in his great adventure.

Paul goes on in v4:

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

The key words here are two: varieties and the same. Let me say something about each.

Varieties

Paul says there varieties of gifts, services, activities. He is describing the life of the local church and painting a wonderfully varied picture of it.

This week, Emma and I in the office have been taking a look at the programme calendar for 2019. PCC at its Saturday awayday has been thinking about next step challenges and opportunities. Tomorrow I have a meeting with a small team of people to think about some fun things we might do together this year – repeats perhaps of what we have done before and some new ideas to consider.

In all if this there is huge variety.

Paul talks about variety:

Of Gifts – we are all completely different people, with different backgrounds, experiences, hopes, dreams,

Of Services – we can all do different stuff. Some of us are practical, some are intellectual, some are imaginative and creative, some can see the possible, some can make it happen.

Of activities – it wouldn't do for us all to be the same. We all like doing different things ... some are musical, some sporty, some artistic, some can write, some can draw, some are great at IT, some are great with people, some are great with children, or families or the elderly, or the outsider, or the lonely or the poor or the marginalised.

We are not all alike. Church is variety and we are part of that varied picture.

Looking at the calendar with Emma may be that we started looking at Sundays. Even then no two Sundays are the same any more. Even these next three Sunday evenings show us this clearly: we have the ACC concert this evening, the week of prayer for Christian unity the next week and then a more normal Sunday evening which these days can be as many as 20 plus people.

So the calendar may start with Sundays but we then need to add weekday activities, groups bigger and smaller, children's groups, adult small groups, work in the schools, work in the community, concerts, exhibitions, church tours, engagement with community groups who come to us ... the list goes on and on and on and that's not to mention baptisms, weddings and funerals which are all part of a regular week's work.

As we look at 2019, we see variety, we see busyness and we see God's hand at work in us and through and around us in so many different and varied ways. If we think church is what we do on a Sunday morning, we have a very small picture of what's really going on.

So, the first word is variety, the second word is the same ... in vv4,5,6

The same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God

Now we may say this is an early hint of how Paul thought about God, a doctrine which developed over the years as a one God, three persons God, Father, Son and Spirit. If so, that is quite exciting.

But what's also exciting is that all the variety we have described, all the creativity, the activity and the colourful artistry, is not chaos, or confusion or crazy. It's held, it's safe and it's coherent because it's the same God who has it all in the palm of his hand. Father, Son and Spirit, Spirit Lord and God, have it all, have us all in the palm of their hand.

Variety and sameness give us encouragement and confidence that we are about his business in being church in 2019, reflecting him and his character to the world, serving him in the place we are given to live.

Paul says in v7:

⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

We all have a part to play in this and we will be saying more about that next week.

Let me close with a picture. It's a picture Tom Wright offers us as he writes about this passage from 1 Cor 12 ... it's a picture of an orchestra and its conductor. In any orchestra there are sections: strings, woodwind, brass and percussion. Although they may think themselves more

important, all have equal value in making the music happen.

Tom Wright says this ... p153

If the church is like the orchestra, God is the conductor and the ministry and mission a wonderful symphony, concerto or fantasia. We work together, have fun together, play together, worship, pray, serve, reach out with God's love together ... in variety ... but for the same Lord and Master. You, me, us together, inspired by this vision and empowered by his Spirit to be Jesus in our day and to make him known.

Let's pray ...