

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Reading: Isaiah 6:1-8

Mark 1:1-8

Date: Sunday 15 January 2012

Vision Sunday

Today is Vision Sunday – we started the idea of Vision and Gift last year. Now we are doing it for the second time so it has become a tradition!

We are also trying an experiment this term – we will be following the same sermon theme in the evening as in the morning – so that everyone has the chance to follow the same material.

I want to us this morning to listen to and learn from two men from scripture who have things to teach to us which are extremely pertinent at this present time.

The two men are Isaiah the prophet and John the Baptist.

Isaiah

I saw the Lord

I am lost, a man of unclean lips

I live among a people of unclean lips

My eyes have seen the king

Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?

Here am I; send me!

And he said: Go!

We will notice three things here which are really important.

Focus on the living God

Focus on Isaiah and those around him

Focus on the God's call and Isaiah's response

Focus on the living God

We might think that vision starts with us – with an awayday, with a flip chart and with a series of fancy coloured board markers or felt tip pens. Well, the good news is that while this deal can be part of the process of articulating the vision, the bad news is that it doesn't start there. Vision, in bible terms, starts with the living God:

Isaiah says:

I saw the Lord.

My eyes have seen the King.

For Isaiah and for so many who have followed him in ministry and mission, their vision, their direction, their passion for the work is set by their seeing God and sensing something of his awesome presence.

Zoe's dissertation has been handed in this week. Some of you have helped with interviews and conversations. Thank you. One of the last interviews she did was with Elizabeth Hills, Dr Elizabeth Hills the original USPG Doctor to go from the comfort of her home in the UK to Muheza Hospital in Tanzania. And she did that journey, not for the money (chance would be a fine thing), nor for the prestige of being a cool doctor in Africa and doing cool stuff in a faraway land

(as if catching malaria and living with AIDS were cool). Elizabeth did the journey because she had a sense of the awesome nature of God and desired to follow him and do his thing.

A few years ago now we did take the PCC away for a day. We spent some time looking at churches' vision statements. We were in two groups, I gave them a starter for ten and there was no conferring. After quite some minutes of discussion on our own we came back together and told the story of our conversations. Amazingly we had each discarded 19 or so other ones and had both come up with the same statement. It is the one we use today It's everywhere and I hope it is becoming part of our DNA. Part of who we are.

To live by faith
To be known by love
To be a voice of hope

And it is the vision of the awesome nature of God which has driven these words and inspires them and infuses them with meaning:

To live by faith in God who is known as Father, Son and Spirit
To be known by love as revealed in Jesus
To be a voice of hope as the Spirit offers hope to the world

It was a spine-tingling moment when we realised how this discussion had gone. It was a wonderful reminder that God is on the throne.

*I saw the Lord.
My eyes have seen the King.*

Focus on Isaiah and those around him

Vision is then mediated to ordinary human beings like you and like me.

Isaiah describes himself as lost and a person of unclean lips. He lives among a people of unclean lips.

Extraordinary though it is, God chooses to use ordinary people to bring the vision to life. There's nothing special about me – you knew that already, of course. And there's nothing special about you – I have known that for sure for a long time. There's nothing special about us. We are fragile, weak, vulnerable little people – but God chooses to use us to bring about the vision, to change society and to transform the world in which we live.

Having an honest and real view of who we are is a very good place to start. Who we are and what we have is fundamentally not a whole great deal. But God knows that and he can still do something with us.

We need to be careful here because self-image and self-worth are really tricky things – especially for women. Only this week I have heard someone say I'm only a ... whatever it is (mother, teacher, cleaner, secretary, young person). We need to have a right sense of our weakness and unworthiness before almighty God, but we should not beat ourselves up as if we have no value or worth at all. He

knows us better than we know ourselves and he loves us just the same.

Focus on God's call and Isaiah's response

And so it's in the context of the worship of the living God, and the sense that Isaiah knows himself well (with all his faults and failings) that he hears these amazing words:

*Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?
And he says: Here am I; send me!*

Vision is worked out when ordinary people like you and me hear the extraordinary voice of God calling to us, by name, and we respond and we move and we make the difference he wants us to make. Last week Luke was talking about walking across the room, prompted by God to reach out to someone who was alone or in need of company, friendship or affirmation.

*Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?
Here am I; send me!
We hear the question and we give the answer.
And he said: Go!*

Vision for us this year is about going. It's about leaving the dependent relationship we have had for so many years with St John's College Cambridge, saying that we can do this thing that we do because we believe God has called us to do it.

The ministry and mission which we undertake from CMI has never been about that building as such. The building has been a crucible in which ministry and mission has been forged; it has been a mould out of which ministry and mission could grow and develop. We have demonstrated that can bring change and transformation and life to this village and community and we can do from anywhere.

Temporarily we will be doing it from this building which for most of the week stands empty and little used. You can either say it's open for private prayer and contemplation or you can say it's the biggest room in the village and it's standing empty and costing us money. Not for much longer. The PCC on Tuesday evening will take the first steps in moving towards replacing the heating system (as per the MAP project) and allowing the church building to play host temporarily to the office and the café from the CMI.

*Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?
Here am I; send me!
And he said: Go!*

We are going ... and by the end of this term we will be gone. Working out the vision we believe God has given us in new premises and in new and exciting ways.

John the Baptist

The second figure to consider is John the Baptist Like Isaiah – but this time in the NT – we see where John points us and where we too are to point if we are to explore and fulfil the vision God give us.

J the B appears on the scene as the one promised in Isaiah 40 and in Micah 3.

As the NT opens, suddenly the pace quickens and it is clear that God is once again on the move in the pages of history.

There are classic signs that John is a prophet as of old

He is a preacher – he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

He attracted the crowds – all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him

He was a physical guy with a dramatic ministry – he was baptising in the river

He was distinctive – what he eats and what he wears are interesting

And we readily get the idea that here is someone we need to take note of and listen to carefully.

However interesting all this is, the main thrust of John's significance comes next, where we read this:

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit

John is exciting but only to a degree. He is not the main attraction. He is not the real deal. J the B is not superman

...

Let me tell you a story about Superman and Lois Lane

...

Glorious day out flying together

Suddenly cloud comes in

Lois is very anxious, but Superman is reassuring

Puts his hand down through the cloud ...

We're going over Paris – I just felt the top of Eiffel Tower

We're going over London – I just felt the top of Big Ben

We're going over Sunninghill.

How do you know? What did you feel?

I didn't feel anything – but someone's just nicked my watch!

J the B is not Superman in the sense that it's not all about him. Although Superman disguised himself for the most part as Clark Kent. Still everyone knew that as Superman he was the one who would sort things out, right wrongs, mend relationships, do good and conquer evil.

J the B knew that that was someone else's job. His job was to point to that someone and help to make him known.

I want us notice two things from this observation about J the B:

- a. As disciples of Jesus in our day we also may be exciting, but we are not the main attraction.
- b. There is something tricky about but vitally important about sitting in the second chair

a. As disciples of Jesus in our day we also may be exciting, but we are not the main attraction.

People become Christians in all kinds of ways

Gavin Reid:

Anglican Church – role in community, small core large fringe

Other denominations – large core, small fringe

Other denominations – clear whether you are in or out

Anglican Church/The Parish Church much more fluid and fuzzy at the edges.

People are looking for a sense of belonging – Advent and Christmas are amazing opportunities to invite; the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations and the Olympics will give us great opportunities to be creative and imaginative later in the year. The concert series we are putting together is an easy thing to invite someone to come to.

But please note: the invitation is not to us and how amazing we are, but to him and how amazing he is.

J the B pointed people to Jesus and that is our role today.

Tension – if we are weird, or unfriendly or unwelcoming that will not help.

Conference just before Christmas – not a Christian conference rather a leadership resource for those in business and commerce. Yet ... the words people used and the expressions they came up with and the hopes and dreams they had for their work were amazingly "spiritual" in nature. It was like Jesus was the elephant in the room – it was like they were searching for him, reaching for him without naming his name.

Extraordinary welcome/ people were much more friendly than at many conferences I go to. Basis of the organisation

and personality of the founder sets the tone – people really get it. It's a challenge!!

Tension: People come to faith often because they know someone who is a Christian and are interested in their lifestyle or attracted to it in some way – but it's the Christ in me they see not me myself.

Our role is always to point away from ourselves and towards him. Our role is to get alongside and to invite. It's to be proactive, it's not just to live the life and hope that some thing will happen. That a bit like people who say they won't give to the work of the church they will just do things for church – the old time and talents thing. Now please don't get me wrong. Time and talents are very important – but in addition to giving money not instead of giving money. The local church maybe the hope of the world but it does not run on thin air!

So people need to see Jesus in us and at our initiative be invited to come and see. Advent and Christmas just gone or indeed any exciting Sunday service any time of the year offer loads of chances to say "Would you like to come along to this or that?" Often people are just waiting to be invited. People have a longing for a sense of belonging and in today's dysfunctional and fragmented world what could be more exciting than being invited to belong to a group of really cool people who are on fire for Jesus in a very safe Anglican kind of a way!!

We are not the main attraction – he is! We are to point people to him.

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

b. There is something tricky about but vitally important about sitting in the second chair

In the last few days I have seen two films which illustrate this very well: Sherlock Holmes 2 and The Iron Lady. In quite different ways we see first Dr Watson and then Dennis Thatcher occupying the second chair, playing second fiddle, complementing and supporting, encouraging and enabling the one who is the leader.

What do I mean by all this? I am delighted to say that we have a new curate coming. I have this week invited Sue Cooke to come to do her curacy here with us after she finishes her training at Ridley Hall, Cambridge in the summer. Sue is a single woman, an experienced deputy headteacher, someone who is passionate for Jesus and what he is doing in and through the local church. I am very excited that she has said yes and that she will be coming.

So what's this business about the second chair? Bill Hybels talks about the local church being the hope of the world and he has a huge amount to say about being a leader in the local church. But not everyone can be the senior leader. Someone will be in the second chair and will have a critical supportive role to play.

As you know I am training incumbent by proxy to Sir Philip Watts in Binfield. This second chair role is the role that Phil has been keen to play as his colleague Margaret has been the senior curate there. It is the role he will play when the

new Rector is appointed at some point in the future. It is the role Luke has played for me here in Sunningdale since Easter last year when he came. And it is vitally important. And it's not always easy. It requires loyalty, submission, support, humility, sensitivity and grace. It's a role Sue will begin to play in due course here as well.

Often the senior leader will be the visionary. The second chair will see that the vision is worked out and worked through. Often the senior leader will be the one who sets strategic direction and leads from the front. The second chair will make sure that the is are dotted and the ts crossed.

J the B was the second chair. He knew that he was not the main attraction. But his role was vitally important as he taught, ministered and called people to repentance and faith.

It was not all about him. But his role was a signposting one, a supporting one, an encouraging one, a critical one.

We might want to ask whether there are places where we play the role of the person in the second chair, where we support, encourage and help the churchwardens, the choir, the youth and children's work. Are there places at work where we can be the second chair person to our boss, or to other colleagues. Are there times in the family where we can take a second chair role and play it really well? Are there times when the vicar can play the second chair role to the Archdeacon or the Bishop? If so, what are they and how might he or she do it?

J the B offers us these two perspectives to consider today and this week – an opportunity to invite and an opportunity to serve, to be a signpost and to be a trusted and loyal supporter.

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit

Isaiah and John the Baptist – two men from scripture who saw how they fitted into the scheme of things, how they could be used by God to work out his vision.

Knowing our place and playing our part are two vitally important things. What a responsibility! What a privilege! And, at the start of this year of change and transformation, how very, very exciting!

Let's stand and pray together.