

THE VISION – THE WELCOMING CHURCH

(Matthew 15.29-38 and Romans 12.14-22)

Here at St. Mary's we rather pride ourselves as being a church which gives a good welcome to people. We have worked at it over the years. We have a rota of welcomers. We have a little booklet to guide those who are on that rota. A recent survey by the Ministry Development Team confirmed how good we are at it.

We have spent over £30,000 on making our path easier to negotiate and therefore telling folk that they are welcome to come up that path to church and, importantly, to the Garden of Remembrance.

So what is this vision thing about being welcoming? And what is this *vision* thing anyway? Last week Paul quoted John Stott as saying that for a Christian the only vision is to focus on Jesus. That's the big over-arching vision. But I want to suggest that we can split that over-riding vision into many constituent parts, each one part of being like Jesus

Who in the whole world does not recognise the name *Disney*? How many Disney films have we seen? How many Disney toys have we or our children or grandchildren played with? And do you know what Walt Disney said? He said *Always remember that this whole thing started with ... a mouse*. Jonathan Swift, of *Gulliver's Travels* fame, said this about vision: *Vision is the art of seeing things invisible*. So, two ways of looking at the concept of vision - one, that big things start little; the other that vision is looking beyond the here and now. Let's leave vision for the time being and look at Jesus.

Do you have vivid memories of silly little things which happened when you were a little kid – you can't think why you remember them but you do? One of those things that I remember so clearly from some seventy years ago was a picture in a book. The book was called *Bible Stories retold for children*. I did not understand the word *retold* but I can picture now Jesus in the middle of huge crowd and standing next to him and looking up at him, a small boy clutching a basket with two fishes and a chunk of bread in it.

Our reading from Matthew is a familiar one. Whether there were 5,000 people there or 4,000 doesn't matter. Jesus goes for a rest. He sits down, perhaps

puts his head in his hands as we do when we are tired. When he looks up, here are hundreds of people all wanting something from him. And he recognises their need ... **and he responds:** the mute speak; the blind see; the lame walk; the sick are made well. Then, of course, those thousands of people are fed – out of a little boy's lunch box.

That was Jesus. He had a concern for the people and did something about it. What about his disciples? *What can we do?* That was their cry. *What can we do?* Where was their vision?

In the 1950s in Manchester things were grim in some areas and quite good in others. Hulme was grim area but it more or less abutted Deansgate where there were some quite posh shops. A little boy from Hulme was gazing into the window of a shoe shop. He was shivering with cold and was barefoot. A well-dressed man passing by saw him and asked him: *Why on earth are you looking so intently into that window?*
Please sir, I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes.

The man took his hand and led him onto the shop, asking the assistant to bring a basin of warm water and a towel and then a few pairs of socks. He took the boy into the back of the shop, took off his fine leather gloves, sat the boy down, knelt down and washed and dried the little lad's feet. When the socks arrived he put a pair on to the boy's feet and bought a pair of shoes which he also put on the little lad's feet, placing the spare socks into a bag.

How that? he said; *more comfortable?*

As the man got to his feet the little boy caught hold of his hand and, looking up into his face and with tears in his eyes, said *Are you Jesus?*

A very grateful child who had experienced love and care.

For quite a long time now we as a church have tried to welcome and encourage children in our normal Sunday services, with some success but with limited success. At its meeting last Wednesday the PCC embraced a vision for children's ministry here, particularly in our services. The vision is for a dedicated team working with the children, teaching them, praying with them. The vision is for the space in the back corner to be provided with

suitable furniture and fully carpeted. The vision is for the children to have their own, virtually soundproof, space during sermon time.

All that will not happen overnight. If it did, it would not be a vision. It needs commitment and perhaps a degree of sacrifice from some of us; it needs patience from a lot of us; above all, it needs prayer from all of us. If, with God's help, it comes to pass we will be a still more welcoming church expanding the good work of Godzone and Messy Church.

Someone, not so long ago, had a vision for bringing back to worshipping God, people whose churchgoing and therefore worship had lapsed. The vision was given the name *Back to Church Sunday*. The concept was that such people were given a written invitation to come to church on a particular Sunday each year.

At St. Mary's our vision is not limited to former churchgoers so we have called it *Come to Church Sunday*. If you have read the recent *St. Mary's News* you will know that there were almost 50% more at our *Come to Church Sunday* service on 27th September than normal and some of them have been since. The welcoming started, not at the Church door, but when some of us gave that personal written invitation to friends and backed it up with a spoken welcoming encouragement. So next year? How about a wider vision for next *Come to Church Sunday*? If you didn't invite someone this year, do widen your vision for next year.

Those of us without any qualification who stand up here on our hind legs and have the temerity to preach to you do our preparation in different ways – my way is a combination of thinking as I go about and some prayer.

At All Saints' there is a short service of Morning Prayer on four mornings each week. As is sometimes the case here in Service of the Word, towards the start of the service the leader says *The night has passed and the day lies open before us. Let us pray with one heart and mind*. Then there is a short time of silence.

At a recent Morning Prayer I had just been given short notice that I was to preach today and in the silence I prayed for help. It came in one of the readings that morning. Like ours this morning it was from Matthew. It was the passage from Matthew 5 about Christians being salt and light. That chimes in

with today's passage from Romans where Paul is talking about how to show love to everyone, even those we don't like or who don't like us. Showing love is a welcoming action because we do it in Jesus' name. It was what Jesus was doing in our Matthew reading.

This time it is not welcoming people to a church building, but welcoming people to know how much Jesus loves them and cares for them. What is our vision for this?

That sort of welcoming happens every time we know someone has a problem and we pray for them and tell them we are praying for them and the problem. And when your prayers are answered, telling them how pleased for them you are and how grateful you are to God.

Someone at St. Mary's some time ago had a vision to reach out in welcoming love by visiting and upholding people known to be unwell or lonely, church goers or not. It's done now in an organised way through Jennifer Meadows and her little team. That work started because someone had that vision to reach out in welcoming love; the vision has grown so that every week Jennifer is in St. Mary's to welcome anyone who wants to come and share their concerns. What is our extended vision? Could it be to work so that everyone, but everyone, in this village knows that we would welcome them in Jesus' name to call on the team or call in to chat with Jennifer?

A little poem:

The man who misses all the fun is he who says 'It can't be done'.
In solemn pride, he stands aloof and greets each venture with reproof.
Had he the power he would efface the history of the human race.
We'd have no radio, no cars, no streets lit by electric stars;
No computer, no mobile phone; we'd linger in the age of stone.
The world would sleep if things were run by folks who say, 'It can't be done.'

What was it Jonathan Swift said? *Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.*
Dare we add and, with God's help, making them happen?