

Unity in the Church –John 17 vs 20 to end

This morning, I'd like to talk to you about our church.

As many of you are aware, on Sunday, 18th April of this year, our church held its Annual Parochial Church Meeting. At that meeting we re-elected our two Church Wardens, Michael Brooks and Judy Sharp. In addition, we elected new members onto the Parochial Church Council. The PCC is the ruling body of a church. Our PCC is composed of Jeanette-our vicar, Hilda-our Associate Minister, two readers (one being Barry and the other me), the churchwardens, and elected laypersons. Members of the PCC meet together every two months to discuss the management and practical issues of the church. In addition, at our church, we have a Ministry Leadership Team. The Ministry Leadership Team's main purpose is the strategic development of the church. The MLT consists of the vicar, two church wardens, an Associate Minister, two readers, a pastoral assistant, and one or two other co-opted people. This team also meets every two months. As well, there are a number of different committees, such as worship, fabric, education, finance, pastoral, social that meet to take forward strategic and specific action plans. The organisation that I have just outlined is represented by a diagram on a sheet of paper that you should have had given to you this morning with your books.

If you now turn over, you'll find printed 'A Vision for the Future of St. Mark's Church'. Following a morning in the autumn of 2009, where members of the congregation and ministry team were invited to meet with Canon Jean Kerr, a small group, made up from members of the church, spent many hours and with much thought put together a draft Vision Statement which they presented to the church's Ministry Leadership Team (MLT).

So this is our Vision Statement that was agreed and passed by the Parochial Church Council in March of this year. As many of you probably know, business organisations, schools, hospitals all have Vision Statements. A vision statement answers the question, "Where do we want to go?" What we are doing when creating a vision statement is articulating our dreams and hopes for the future of our church. It reminds us of what we are trying to build. A vision statement is our inspiration, the framework for all our strategic planning. While a vision statement doesn't tell you how you're going to get there, it does set the direction for our future planning. Our vision statement will have a huge influence on decision making and the way we allocate our resources for a number of years.

St. Mark's Vision Statement responds to three key questions:

1. What will St. Mark's be? You can see on the paper the response is that it will be a 'centre of prayer and praise and also a place which will have a refreshing Christ-centred environment where children, young people and adults will be excited about Christ.' In response to the question: 'How will it feel?' it says that the church should be 'a welcoming, loving, dynamic, moving and influential place in the heart of the Biggin Hill community.' Finally, in response to the third question: What will it offer? 'there will be opportunities to enable each of us to discover and develop God's plans.' However, any Vision Statement needs unpacking and translating into strategic action plans. Strategic action plans need to be SMART – in other words, specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and set within a specific time frame.

The Ministry Leadership Team has recently drawn up a strategic plan to try to address the question of how to make St. Mark's a 'Christ-centred environment where children, young people and adults will be excited about Christ.' This plan, along with

others that are developed, will be on display at the back of church for all to see. These plans are not just for members of the PCC or the Ministry Leadership Team they are for all members of our church. We need each and every one of us, not only to be aware of our vision, but to be active and supportive in taking our plans forward.

However, no matter how much a church has going for it, division can negate its vision. The word division is constructed of the word vision with the prefix "di", which means, "double". Double vision can be dangerous. Let's take a look at the Bible to see how the words of Jesus can help us.

Our Gospel reading this morning is from John 17. The whole of chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer on the night before He went to the cross. Firstly, Jesus prays for himself (verses 1 to 5), then he prays for his disciples (verses 6 to 19) and, finally, he prays for future believers, all those who would follow Him including you, me and others you know (verses 20 to 26). Knowing that Jesus prayed for us should give us confidence as we seek to take his work forward here in Biggin Hill. This morning I want to concentrate specifically on His prayer for future believers. If we could think of Jesus praying for us today, what do you suppose that prayer would be? Now in this reading, Jesus speaks of us as "being one"—wanting us to have "unity." What would that unity look like?

I suggest it's a unity in which people love each other because they love God. It will never be that Christians will organise their churches all the same way. It will never be that they will worship God all in the same way. Likewise they will not all believe precisely and exactly the same things." History reveals that we have often loved our creeds, organisations, and rituals more than we have loved each other.

The message and motive for us is love—not just any love but the "love with which God has loved us." The ultimate reason for the Church "to be as one" is that the world may know the nature of God, that is, a God of love, mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, and hope.

We can talk all day long about unity, about oneness in the universal Church. But it all begins where we live, where we can see it and feel it, where we truly learn what it means to be a Christian community, learning to share the love of Christ here at St. Marks. There must be unity if a local church is to make an effective impact for God. Once again, unity and uniformity are not the same thing. God has given all of us different perspectives to bring to the table. The Bible is not saying there isn't room for disagreement among good Christians. Rather, we are encouraged, even when we do disagree, and we will, to speak in such a way as to promote harmony. Our motive for speaking and how we deliver our words are just as important as what we say. We should be careful of a critical spirit. The biggest barriers to effective unity, according to the prayer of Jesus, are not so much out-dated methods, or inadequate presentations of the gospel, as realities like gossip, insensitivity, negative criticism, back-biting, failure to appreciate others, selfishness and every other form of lovelessness.

So, how should we behave to promote and help unity?

Firstly, we must remember who we belong to: Once we surrender our lives to Jesus, we are no longer ours but God's and need to act like a child of God. Secondly, we need to remember who we are: as Christians we are a representative of God here on this earth and so we need to try to live as God wants us to. And finally, we need to realise why we are here: God left us here on earth after we were saved to lead others in the community to Jesus.

In addition, as a church we should spend time together reading and studying the Bible, worshipping together, praying together and enjoying fellowship together. These things will help to keep us united.

There must be a unity of purpose if a local church is to have an impact for God. God's purposes are greater than our minor differences in the local church. When we get to heaven, will it really matter that we voted with the minority on the colour of the church carpet? What will really matter is whether or not we have accomplished God's purpose for our church.

A church may look beautiful and have the latest technology, the latest innovative programmes and sharpest presentations, but without unity it will come apart at the seams. Amen.

A vision for the future of St Mark's Church

What will St Mark's be?

A centre of prayer and praise; the spiritual home of a nurtured, caring and growing family that can develop as individuals, small groups and as a larger community equipping themselves for service for God.

A place which will have a refreshing Christ centred environment where children, young people and adults will be excited about Christ.

How will it feel?

A welcoming, dynamic, moving and influential place in the heart of the Biggin Hill community that is relevant to the needs of the local people and provides for them in their daily lives.

What will it offer?

Opportunities to enable us to discover and develop God's plan.

Opportunities to support each other in living the Christian life, sharing God's Word in an appropriate way to all in our local community so that they too might come to know Him and love Him.

A place where everyone, including the hurt, the wounded and the unloved, is welcome and will find love, healing acceptance and hope in Christ.

