

DREAMS FOR THE CHURCH ST JOHN'S, 5.6.16, 9.30 am

At Pentecost, a few weeks ago, we heard again the familiar story from Acts of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the Church. Peter was called upon to explain what was happening, and he quoted from the prophet Joel, including this phrase: *Your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams* (Acts 2:17). Today, I want to ask you a question: what is your dream for the Church? More specifically, what is your dream for St John's?

Call me a realist, or call me a pessimist, but I suspect that in response to that question, at least some of you will be thinking in terms of robed choirs, chanted canticles, and, dare I mention, 'Green Book' services?! Many of you will be picturing the people who used to sit next to you, behind or in front of you, who are no longer here among us. In other words, your dream for St John's is a dream of the past. To those of you whose dreams I've just described, I want to say, gently but firmly – "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".¹
(L P Hartley)

If you read *Teulu Asaph*, you'll be aware that there's an American called Mark Yaconelli currently working in the Diocese. On Maundy Thursday, after he'd been here a few weeks, Mark was asked to speak briefly at the Chrism Eucharist, about his impressions of the Diocese so far. This is part of what he had to say:

. . . many people in the Diocese seem greatly burdened. There is a heaviness, a tiredness, a draining anxiety, sometimes a bitterness and resentment at the state of the church. I believe this heaviness comes from grief. The Old Church as we have known it has died. I am sorry to say this so plainly. The church that you have loved, the church of your parents and grandparents, the church that you knew in your youth, the church you felt called to serve has died and is returning to the ground.

It's not your fault. You've done nothing wrong. God gives, God takes away. You have been as faithful as the previous generations, but like all living things, that church lived, grew old and died. And you have been living through the despair and anxiety and heaviness that loss brings.²

I'm sure at least some of you recognise those feelings. I also understand that for St John's, there's more to it than that. Last month, I shared some of my feelings of hurt, betrayal and rejection, as I said then, inflicted mainly by people who chose to leave St John's, people who I feel should have stayed and supported us all in rebuilding this church family. If that's the way that I feel about some of our history, I'm sure that many of you carry far deeper wounds, and feel much greater pain. There are people who are no longer here among us, who should be. The family of St John's has been damaged, and just as we feel great pain when there are rifts within our human families, so we feel the pain caused by rifts within our church family.

That brings me to my own dream for the church. I dream of church as a functional, loving family. Families will always have hard times; they'll always have disagreements, arguments. But loving families make up with each other, forgive each other, accept each other's foibles and differences, and get on together. Families have to change and adapt; new members are welcomed, whether they arrive through marriage or new birth; and there are sad farewells to those whose earthly life is over. If families don't constantly do all these things, they become dysfunctional and unloving.

The church is meant to be a family. As believers, we're children of the same heavenly Father, we're brothers and sisters in Christ. Our Lord commands us to love one another; it's the mark of Christian believers, by which other people will know that we are Jesus' followers (John 13:34-35). So if the members of a loving human family are able to make up after arguments, forgive each other for times when they hurt each other, accept each others' foibles and differences, and welcome new members, adapting family life to accommodate them, how much more should all that be true within the church family?

Sadly, it's one area of our discipleship in which the Enemy's attacks are all-too-often successful. Christians are more often known for their divisions and arguments, their cliques and disagreements, than they are for their love for one another. I'm going to be very direct, and use some recent examples from this congregation. A few weeks ago, there was a lady in the congregation here, who nobody recognised. As there were also a couple of Baptism families here, I didn't get a chance to

Speak to her after the service, so I asked around afterwards. The one person who had chatted to this lady was Rita. Now, Ted and Rita have been members here for a couple of years. In that time, they've been involved in the Christmas and Summer Fairs, and in the Community Pop In, amongst other things – they haven't kept themselves aloof. And yet Rita wasn't aware that the visitor she was speaking to was a visitor! And I suspect that there are people here who wouldn't know Rita if they saw her.

Another example is the person I approached a few months ago to ask if they would take on a particular task within the Church. They refused to do so, and gave as their reason the pain they felt following an incident which had happened in a church meeting before I became the Vicar – which means it was at least six years ago!

And a third example from this congregation is the fact that when I became Vicar of St James', and the 11.00 am service came to an end, a number of people thought it was a good opportunity for this congregation to be able to enjoy refreshments, and spend some time together after the Sunday service. After a couple of months, they gave up doing it, because so few people were bothering to stay!

I was originally encouraged to share my own feelings of hurt, betrayal and rejection, on the basis that the relationship between a minister and the church they serve is such that my own feelings are probably mirrored amongst the congregation. I believe that the examples I've just described are indicators that that is indeed the case. I also believe that

the time has come to put those feelings behind us. Now is the time to forgive the people who've hurt, betrayed and rejected us. Now is the time to invite those who have left St John's, and not joined another church, to come back and rejoin us. Now is the time to renew our commitment to love one another. Now is the time to look to the future, not to the past. Now is the time to make this church family a functional, loving family once again. Let's not allow the Enemy to get the better of us!

Going back to Mark Yaconelli's comments on Maundy Thursday. He continued with these words:

Now we're living within the in-between time. The Old Church is gone, the New Church is waiting to be born. We are living between the dreaming and the coming true. This is an age of creativity. This is a time of experimentation, a time to try out new ideas.

Remember when you first felt God – that secret passion that longed to do good, to love people, to heal the sick, to take risks for the sake of love? This is the time to turn those dreams into reality.

This is the time when all of us are invited to live the life we've longed to live . . .

And so I ask you once again – what is your dream for St John's?

Let's spend a few minutes in prayer:-

- hold before the Lord now anyone in our church family who has hurt you; ask him to give you grace to forgive them, and to restore your relationship; pray for his blessing on them.
- hold before the Lord anyone whom you have hurt; ask him to forgive you, and to give you grace to restore that relationship; pray for his blessing on them.
- hold before the Lord those who have left St John's; ask him to help any who are currently not part of a church family to find their way back to St John's.
- hold before the Lord our church family; ask him to give us the grace we need to be a loving and functional family, able to rise to the challenge of the times, and to welcome and adapt to accommodate new members.
- Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I leave you with a phrase which I came across in the Church where I served my curacy: "Dream *big* dreams; pray *big* prayers; and then get on and do it!"

¹ L P Hartley, The Go-Between, (Bloomsbury, Hamish Hamilton, 1953) – the opening line.

² Mark's entire message can be read here: <http://cinw.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/03/Chrism-Eucharist-Message-March-2016.pdf>