

Vision Sunday

With indebtedness to John Stott for his sermon delivered at the Keswick Convention on 17th July 2007 entitled, *Becoming More Like Christ*.

Today, we're thinking about our vision for the future, as a church. Where do we think God might be leading us? And, in particular, what will that mean for us in the year ahead?

We'll think about that in a moment. But first, we're going to look briefly at the Bible together. And I want to begin with a question.

What is God's purpose for his people?

That's not an abstract, theological question that's only for scholars and academics to chew on. It's a very personal question that all of us need to be able to answer.

What is God's purpose for you and me?

It's a question that we've probably all asked at one time or another. Given that we have repented of our sin and turned to Jesus in faith, what comes next? What is God's purpose for my life?

And we might answer that question in different ways.

Perhaps we might answer that God wants me to be happy. Or that he wants me to be fulfilled. We might say that he wants me to be productive, to do good in the community and make a difference to the lives of others.

There are a variety of answers we might give.

But there is one answer that trumps all others.

What is God's purpose for you and me?

It's that we would each become like Jesus.

That's his purpose for every one of us, who belong to Jesus.

It stands above and before all others.

"Well, Martin," you may and should be saying, "that's all very good. But show us where you find that in the Bible. Show us where the Bible says that, so that we don't have to take your word for it but can read it for ourselves."

So that's my task over the next few minutes.

Where does the Bible say that this is God's over-riding purpose for each one of us here, who belong to Jesus?

Well, there are three parts of Scripture that we need to look at together.

So, look with me, first, at Romans 8, verse 28 and 29.

They say this:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Do you see?

God the Father predestined us, in eternity past, to be conformed to the image of his Son. In other words, to become like Jesus. That is God's purpose for you and me that he willed in eternity past.

Jesus is the true man, who perfectly lived the human life at every moment. When we look at Jesus, we see not only what God looks like but what true humanity looks like. And we become more truly human as we grow in his likeness. Becoming like Jesus means becoming the people that God always intended us to be.

And not only is that what God willed in eternity past, it's what he's doing in us in the present by his Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3, verse 18, which we had read for us a moment ago, is the second part of scripture that we need to turn to. It says this:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

As we come to this passage, we've moved from the past into the present. And it's a wonderful vision of what God is doing among his people now. He predestined us, in eternity past, to become like Jesus. And he is at work today, by his Spirit, transforming us into the image of Jesus. He's using every situation and experience, everything we go through, good and bad, to accomplish his purpose, which is to make us like Jesus, and so make us fit for heaven.

And our third passage tells us where all this is heading as we move now from the present to the future.

Look with me at 1 John 3, verse 2, which says this:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

The Bible doesn't tell us in detail how things will be when Jesus returns. Presumably, that's because we don't need to know. But we can know this. That we will be like him. The Holy Spirit's work in us won't be completed in this life. But at the last day, at the end of history, when Jesus returns, we will be with Jesus, and we will be like Jesus. Then, heaven will be a place where we are happy in God's presence for ever. That's the goal of God's purpose for you and me.

These three passages span the past, the present and the future. And they sketch out a wonderful picture of God's purpose for his people, for you and me: to make us like his Son, Jesus Christ.

But the Bible doesn't stop there. It isn't content merely to sketch out a picture. It fills out that picture with colour by showing us what this means for us in our daily lives now.

In what ways is God changing us to be like Jesus?

What will this look like?

Well, very quickly, here are five passages which illustrate what it means to be like Jesus.

The first way we're to be like Jesus is by humbling ourselves.

Philippians 2, verses 5 says: **In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... and it goes on... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!**

The second is by serving one another.

In John 13, in the upper room, Jesus gets down from the table and does the work of a servant by washing the feet of his disciples. And then, he says: **'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.'**

The third is by loving one another self-sacrificially

Ephesians 5 says: **Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

The fourth is by patiently enduring unjust suffering

1 Peter 2, verses 20 and 21 say this: **But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

Counter intuitively, perhaps, suffering is a tool God uses to make us like Jesus.

And, finally, we're to be like Jesus in his mission.

Jesus himself says, John 20, verse 21: **'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'**

Being like Jesus means going to others with the good news of the gospel

So here, then, are five clear illustrations of God's purpose for you and me: to make us more like Jesus in his self-humbling, his service, his sacrificial love, his patient endurance and his mission.

This is what God is committed to doing in your life and my life. He's committed to using every situation, every circumstance, every experience to make us more like Jesus. And the question we must ask is whether this is what you and I are committed to as we follow Jesus day by day. Are we committed to knowing him in his word, the Bible? Are we seeking to grow like him a little bit more every day, whatever circumstance we might find ourselves in, good or bad? Are we willing to humble ourselves? Are we learning to serve, and love, and endure, and go to others with the gospel? Or is our attention taken up with other things? Are our wills aligned *with* God's or *against* God's?

The answer is probably revealed in our prayers. What do you pray for? Becoming like Jesus isn't attainable by our own strength. It's only attainable through the Spirit's work in us. William Temple, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury, used to illustrate that point from Shakespeare. He said this:

It's no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespear could do it – I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live like that. Jesus could do it – I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his. And if the Spirit [of Jesus] could come into me, then I could live a life like His.

Well, God has given each of us his Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is his way of making us like Jesus. Christlikeness is attainable for each one of us. But are you praying for it? Are you praying for the Holy Spirit to change you from within and make you more like Jesus?

This is God's purpose for you and me. It's in becoming like Jesus that we will be truly happy and fulfilled and lead productive lives that are filled with good. And it's in becoming more like Jesus that we will be more effective in evangelism. John Stott once asked why our evangelistic efforts are so often fraught with failure. And one reason he gave is that we don't look like the Jesus we proclaim.

God's purpose for his people is to make us like Jesus. That stands before and above everything else. And it's to his glory.

It's important that we grasp all this before we go on to consider our vision for the life of our church.

The place to start as we look to the future is our Mission Statement. This is what sets our marching orders. It answers the question, 'What are we supposed to be doing as a church?' And it's been set for us by the Lord Jesus in the Great Commission in Matthew 28. We've simply restated it to reflect our own situation here at Emmanuel. It's this: to help people of our town and local community become fully committed followers of Jesus.

Let me say that again. Our mission is to help people of our town and local community become fully committed followers of Jesus.

The next question we need to ask is what that will look like as we accomplish it. And that's what our Vision Statement seeks to express.

Our Vision Statement is a snapshot, a picture, of the future. And it has three strands.

Firstly, as we look to the future, we see a church that is **gospel hearted**. It's the gospel that unites us as a church family. It's the gospel that changes us and builds us up in spiritual maturity. And it's the gospel that equips us and sends us out to the people of our town and local community.

So, that means we're committed to faithful Bible teaching for all ages. As we look to the future, we see a church in which each of us is becoming more like Jesus as time goes by, from the youngest to the oldest. And it's a church in which we're all play our part – a church of disciple-making disciples. All of that means that we will continue to be committed to expository preaching on Sunday mornings, to home group Bible studies, to one-to-one Bible study and to excellent children's ministry for all ages.

Secondly, as we look to the future, we see a church that is **outward looking**. The gospel turns us outward from ourselves to others. We can say with the apostle Paul, that we're not ashamed of the gospel. We know that it's the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. And we care about those who don't yet know Jesus themselves.

So, that means we're committed to evangelism. As we look to the future, we see a church in which we all work together to make the gospel known. That means that we'll continue to be committed to holding guest services, and evangelistic events, and running evangelistic courses like Christianity Explored. We'll continue to run groups that help us to engage the local community with the gospel, like our toddler group, Buttons.

And it also means we'll continue to support gospel ministries beyond Hastings, like the work being done by CYFA Ventures, and Crosslinks, and Speak Life.

And thirdly, as we look to the future, we see a church that is **others focused**.

The gospel creates a bond of love between us as brothers and sisters of Christ in God's family.

And that means we're committed to fellowship. As we look to the future, we see a Christian community in which church life doesn't only happen on Sundays. It happens throughout the week. That means that we'll continue to be committed to meeting up with each other in mid-week home groups and socially. And we may re-think Hospitality Week this year, to encourage us to spend time together throughout the year, not just on one week of the year.

That's our vision for our church. But what about the year ahead? What do we need to be doing in the next 12 months to make that vision a reality?

Well, that's the question the PCC spent a day thinking and praying about at the back end of last year.

As we look ahead to the next 5 years, there are many things we want to work on. But for the next 12 months, we've identified three priorities.

The first of those is to develop our **children's and youth work**.

When we held our giving review in November, I spoke about the blessing of having so many families and children in the church. And I pointed out that most of our children are currently primary school-age and younger. However, over the next 5 years, that's going to change. In five years' time, the majority of our current group of children will be at secondary school. And that means we need to develop an excellent youth ministry to serve them.

We have a small youth Bible study at the moment. But we need more than that. So, the PCC took the decision to raise funds to employ a youth and children's worker to help us develop the ministry we need.

I said that we had set a minimum fundraising target of £90,000 in the hope that we can offer someone a three-year contract.

The PCC put £40,000 towards that from reserves, meaning that we would need to raise a further £50,000. And I asked whether you would consider giving towards that total.

Well, I'm delighted to tell you that the total raised from gifts and pledges is currently £46,700, meaning total funds of £86,700. That means we're just £3,300 short of our target.

That is extraordinary and I want to thank you for your generosity and support. It's a real sign of the gospel-heartedness of this church. If you haven't yet given but are still thinking about it, then please help us to raise that £3,300.

I hope that we will soon be in a position to start advertising the post.

But we need more than a new staff member.

Some buildings work is going to be necessary. We're going to need to commit energy and money to developing our buildings and facilities.

The PCC has already included some buildings costs into our budget for the year ahead. But we need one or two people who can help to organise and oversee the work that needs doing. That's not people to do the work, but people who can organise builders and electricians and so on. If you can help with that, then please do let me know. That would be a really important way that you could get behind the vision of our church.

But even a church staff member and some work on our buildings still isn't going to be enough.

If we're to develop new ministries in the next 12 months, then we're going to need more leaders and helpers.

And that's true of the other two areas that the PCC has identified as priorities.

Our second priority is to build up our **home groups**.

We currently have 7 home groups, where we help each other to apply the Bible's teaching to our daily lives. All of our groups are reasonably full. But there are still many people in the church who would like to be part of a home group but aren't. So, we need more groups. But that means we need more people to host and lead groups.

Likewise, with our third priority, which is to restart a ministry for the **senior members** of our church family, which members of the local community can also come along to.

In the past we've had different groups for more elderly members. Most recently we had TOAST. Before that it was Lunch Fellowship. Currently, we don't have anything. So, we would like to recruit a team to restart a seniors' ministry. It doesn't need to be the same as what's gone before. It can be something different. But if we're to do that, we need people to run it.

So, alongside our desire to recruit a youth and children's worker is a need to build up new teams of leaders and helpers for our youth work, our home groups and our seniors ministry. Please would you prayerfully consider whether you can serve in any of those ways and enable these ministries to happen. We will commit to training and equipping you and praying for you. Please do speak with me if you might be interested.

So that, very briefly, is our focus for the year ahead: to recruit a youth and children's worker, to build up our ministry teams for youth work, home groups and seniors' ministry. And to develop our buildings so that we can make best use of them for the ministry we're doing.

Please do speak with me if you've got any questions.