

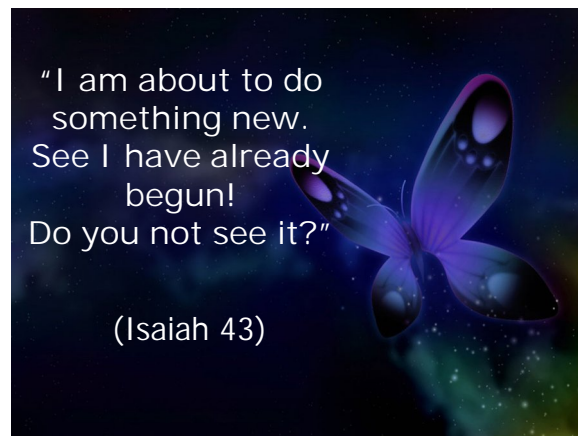
Vision 2010 Sermon Launch – 7th February 2010

St George's Anglican Church

By Rev Iain Gow

I don't know if you know the story of the Vicar who wanted to move a piano from one side of the church to the other. But he was convinced that the church would find this too radical a change, so he moved it an inch every week for 5 years!

Well, I can promise you it won't take 5 years, but today we start together a conversation about what shape a new vision might look like for us as church. As we start this together, we honor the former things that have happened to make St G's who we are today; but we also recognize that the journey with Christ is about being open to the new call of Christ in our lives.



And to help us in that process, I am going to preach from Romans 8.14-17.

"The Spirit of God you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry, Abba Father! The Spirit of God (that longs to dwell in you), affirms to our spirit, that we are God's children, and thus if heirs of God through Christ, open to sharing in his suffering and his glory".

The background to this passage is that Paul is writing to the fledgling group of Christian believers in Rome. He first reminds them of the foundations of their faith, and 2.) enlists their help in bringing the message of the good news of Christ to others. I am not Paul, but I too want to 1.) remind you of your foundations and 2.) enlist your help in discovering a new vision that brings the good news of Christ to others in Auckland. Paul wrote into a culture that was inhospitable to Christianity. Our series last year on the book, UnChristian, reminds us the vision we arrive at must equally understand our culture is suspicious of how we speak and act in the name of God.

The Spirit of God
you have received
is not a spirit of slavery....
(Verse 15a)



Paul sets out in his letter, what is unique about the Christian message, so hang in there with me for a bit as it's a bit heavy. There is something that is beyond ourselves/all of creation and which we have given the name of God. The original divine purpose was for goodness, beauty and truth to be found in life. This was implanted in our souls for we are made in the image of God, but ever since the Garden of Eden, "the devil has concentrated on dislocating the human heart from the divine purpose"



with the consequences being that deep in our core being/our unique self/our DNA, we are held (as though in slavery) to the broken nature we have inherited. Just as I may be pre-disposed towards a heart condition, because of a faulty gene, so too does my fractured spiritual make-up pre-dispose us all towards certain conditions which the Bible calls Sin. The consequences of being a slave to this deep flawed-ness in our very being, is that it makes us determined to pursue a process of self at the cost of others with the consequences being: a destructive personal restlessness, broken relationship, murdered victim, unkind word, unjust political systems and so on.

The Spirit of God you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption, enabling you to cry, Abba Father! The Spirit of God (that longs to dwell in you), affirms to your spirit, that you are God's child and thus an heir of God through Christ (vs 15b - 16)

But we do not however, have to be beholden to our fractured nature that drives us. There is a hope given, which if responded to, enables one to find life as God originally offered. How so? Well Paul uses the language of family to help us understand. First, he uses the word adoption to explain that we are all like children who don't know their original parents. I have a close friend, who explained that not knowing your birth parents is very hard, leads to a restlessness inside as one seeks to find one's identity. Paul is saying here, we are all orphans; we are seeking our identity and won't peace until we re-discover our birth parent God. Now I am aware that this verse may be hard for some, so I want to speak to you for a moment, before I speak to us all. In Jewish culture, you could be disowned by your birth parents; BUT if you were adopted you could never in Law be disowned. And so for all of us, what a truly beautiful notion, if you discover God as your true Father/Mother, you will never be disowned.

The Spirit of God LONGS to dwell in you; make its home in you. God, however, will never force himself on you. Holman Hunt explained it in this way in his famous painting.



If we do open the door, then our will, our freedom is not taken away, but Christ becomes our compass in life for True North, our anchor in times of trial. When I first heard this, I thought it was goodly-gook, but deep down I longed for an intimacy that could not come from sleeping with the next person; I longed for purpose and meaning that was more than my job I loved. One day after much wrestling, I invited God into my heart. The journey has not always been easy since then; but my heart was touched by God's heart and since then I have wanted to live life in the shadow of my eternal father, whose characteristics are goodness, beauty, love and justice. I sometimes joke to people, "if you see our kids do something good, then they take after me; if bad, they take after their mother. It's not true at all of course, but it's a helpful joke as an illustration, because without re-discovering my identity in God as Creator, Father, God, I would never have found life in all its fullness.

We in the 21st century have come up with a myriad ways to help us find life. Some are helpful, most give you the equivalent of the face-lift life, leaving you looking healthy on the outside, but inside there are still places of ugliness that hold one captive. Paul says our DNA can change.....

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Paul reminds us that becoming a follower in the way of Christ, means we do not become an elite, a club to ourselves but a club for others; instead we have responsibilities by becoming the hands, the feet, the voice of God for the World. He reminds us that God's heart bled on the cross for you and me as his Son died and that God's heart still bleeds over the disabled person who feels abandoned; the young person who is struggling to find acceptance, the person who longs for a beautiful marriage, but can't find the person to share it; the unjust systems that are found in our market economy. And this is where the rubber hits the road for us for when we are thinking about our vision, for God says, "if you want a vision that is mine, then it needs to share the pain I feel for the world, by making a difference to it. You can do that with your life; you can do that with the money you earn, the time you have, the way you treat people in your work, the joy you find for yourself and for those you love. And thus, you come to share in God's glory, knowing that in a small way we have made creation better.

So together, in the next five years I want to look at three concentric circles on how we might be the hands and voice of God, before bringing it all together with Paul's passage. I want to look at;

Our.....

Life Together (Church)	OR	Witness to each other (Church)
Life to the World (R&R)		Witness to the World (R&R)
Life in the World (Work/home/play)		Witness in the World (Work/home..)

A Life Together/Witness to each other.....

A good church offers a window into another reality, the reality of God. It is a window into another way of living, thinking, responding, being. The question however is, "does what we do on a Sunday and during the week in our corporate life together, do this?" We plan to hire a Creative Director this July to help us think through this.

A Life to the World/Witness to the World..... (R&R)

Paul was the ultimate bridge-builder. We need to build bridges with our community. We must never forget our more elderly folk in the community. Judy currently does fantastic work, but next year, but more immediately, we are surrounded by schools, and should be in them. In your pack, you will see that we hope to place Leah Wright as a Youth Chaplain in the schools around us.

Life in the World/Witness in the World (Work/home/play)

We need to continue reflecting on what it means to be “followers of Christ” in our work places, our homes, our play by developing a theology that understands Church as being engaged in all creation, not just Sunday. You will see in your pack that we are going to develop a real focus on this in 2010.



Paul’s contention to the early disciples is that there is much in life that pulls us away from experiencing life in all its fullness. His answer is Jesus Christ for Christ is central.

But Paul also understood in his veins that the message needed to be shaped culturally and implores them to help him bring this message in a new way to the culture that surrounds them.

My answer is also Jesus Christ needs to be central in our new vision, but like Paul I want to ask you to help me reshape the message and the pattern of how we ‘does church’, in a way that engages anew with post-modern culture.

I echo my friend’s Adrian words, “I want little part in a church which exists for its own sake. But a church which is prepared to participate in God’s plan to save the world, that is a different matter. That is a vision worth owning. It is a vision that will interest many who stand apart from church, who are unsure of religion, but care deeply of the issues it engages with.” It is a vision that we who are followers of Christ should embrace for it is God’s vision, to redeem the world. So I end by asking you this, will you join me in being adventurous for God.

I want to end with a story! When the Bishop met with me last year to talk about considering coming to St George’s, he said, “I believe St George’s has the potential to become a significant church in NZ, one that could significantly influence the nation.” I am not driven by numbers, but if we get our praying, our loving, our welcome and our structures right, we will grow from 500 to 1000.

You are a generous people I have discovered, people who wish to be the voice and heart of God. Let us neither have a failure of vision, nor a failure of nerve this year. For unto whom much is given, of him/her shall be much asked (Lk 12:48)