

SERMON ST HILDA'S 21 AUGUST 2022

*May the words of my lips
and the meditations of all our hearts
be now and always acceptable to you,
O Lord our strength and our redeemer.
Amen*

Well, I wonder how many of you listening to the Lessons read this morning thought to yourselves “by golly we can put aside the zillion of text books, websites, blogs, and tweets on how to do strategic planning - our God has got all that sussed”.

Today’s sermon will seek first to describe God’s advice on planning and visioning as found in today’s readings and then show how that advice informed the way your Vestry went about preparing the material they will be sharing with you at the meeting after today’s service.

Let’s start by looking at the passage from Jeremiah. God tells Jeremiah that from the time of his conception God has appointed him to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah is taken aback.

“Lord God, he says, you’re making a big mistake! I am a lousy public speaker and I’m too young for anybody to take me seriously.”

But God is not deterred. “Don’t put yourself down. I’ll give you the words to say and I’ll always have your back. You can trust me”.

What I take from this interaction between God and Jeremiah is that God has a vision, a purpose for our lives.

A vision for each of us individually, a vision for our parish, a vision for the Diocese and a vision for the whole world.

Our job in “doing” strategic planning is not solely about us individually or collectively putting our minds to where we want to end up or how best to get there. That’s the secular way.

For us as the body of Christ strategic planning and visioning is about building a relationship with God that enables us to be the person or the parish that God wants us to be.

In the Psalm set for today – Psalm 71 – the psalmist reflects on a long life and how, despite life's ups and downs, the writer has always been aware of the steadfast of the presence of God. And the psalmist says "I've leaned on you for support since the day I was born. I'll never stop thanking you for that!"

The point both passages are making is that when we single-mindedly work to fulfil God's purpose for us, or for the church or the nation of which we are a part, then God will back our efforts and pour God's love on us.

Let's now turn to the Gospel. We are introduced to a woman who has been crippled by a spirit or demon for 18 years. She is unable to stand straight. For 18 years she has had to strain to see the sun, the sky and the stars. For 18 years she has been accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upwards without difficulty. For 18 years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see with just a glance.

But then Jesus calls her. She looks at him and the demon is released. She is healed. She is given new life.

I see parallels between the life of that woman and the life of some of our parishes. Parishes that are, metaphorically, bent over and unable to look up and see the sun. Parishes that see only the dust and dirt underneath their feet. Parishes that struggle to see the path before them, except by straining and twisting.

Often these are parishes that are not prepared to change, who become insular, concerned only with their current members, content to rely on their own devices and efforts in the vain hope that doing more of what was done in the past will lead them to an outcome that is different to their current state of unhealth.

The woman did not ask Jesus to heal her. But she was healed because when he called, she turned her face towards Jesus – the way, the truth and the life. In so doing she regained her life, stood up straight and walked into a new future.

For parishes that desire a different future and are prepared to change, the message from the Gospel passage is clear. It takes nurturing and prodding for a parish to take on its call. It takes even longer for a parish to learn to lean on and truly trust God to help make that happen.

Although it's not easy, it is absolutely necessary to try to live into this state of trust if lasting progress is to be made.

About three weeks ago, Vestry began its task of visioning the future for St Hilda's. It started in the standard way. It asked itself what's needed in our parish. That generated words like growth, retention, young people, and being connected with the community.

Vestry then realistically assessed what had been happening in the parish over the last 10 years, and its current state. That led to a discussion about the opportunities here – including the gifts and resources that have been placed here by God that could enable us to grow God's kingdom. There were heaps of good suggestions for things we could and should do. The question was how do we choose where best to put our efforts?

And it was at that point the meeting turned its face to Jesus.

Vestry asked what do we believe God wants us to be?

And the answer we developed is the proposed vision statement: St Hilda's – a vibrant, faith-based presence within our community.

We explored that further by asking what sorts of things a St Hilda's that was actively pursuing that vision might look like or might be doing. There were many exciting ideas that came out in that discussion.

We then asked, how can we prioritise those ideas?

Again we looked at the life of Jesus.

In Jesus' earthly life he kept three things in balance:

First his intimate relationship up to God. Jesus was constantly talking with God about God's will for him and checking that he was still on track. That's why he spent a lot of time on his own, or in small groups, praying.

Secondly, Jesus formed close relationships with his disciples. He spent time with them, he shared food with them, he laughed with them and he met their families. In other words, he 'did life' with his chosen circle; they were his 'in' crowd,

Thirdly, Jesus reached out, out to the communities in which he lived. He taught, fed, healed and comforted the lost and broken souls he met - like the crippled woman in this morning's Gospel. And he faced criticism for that – again as demonstrated in this morning's Gospel reading.

We applied the balanced Up-In-Out approach of Jesus as our prioritisation criteria.

Vestry discerned that we need to spend more time with God; loving and honouring God and discerning God's vision for us. That's why Vestry proposes as a priority, increasing the regular rhythms of prayer in this parish.

Vestry also thought about the way in which the early church grew and got established. Small groups of Christians met in households: they shared food, prayed together, talked together, grew to know each other well. And then those groups multiplied. It was that knowledge that encouraged Vestry to discern a second priority for this parish - to form more home groups aimed at building discipleship.

And, thirdly, the Vestry discerned a fresh way in which, realistically, given our people and other resources, we might begin to relate better to the local community. That is to offer the community the sort of hospitality or manaakitanga that Jesus would want us to extend. And from those deliberations the Vestry proposes that we prioritise using the church and hall deliberately and more effectively as community hubs.

There will be plenty of time after the service for you to hear and discuss the details of the vision and the priorities – so please stay for the meeting and the shared lunch.

Meanwhile it's important that you to take from this sermon two points.

The first is that God our creator has a vision, a purpose, a calling for us – individually and collectively. When we take time to be with God, to hear God and to act on the opportunities we discern God is opening up for us, then God will bless us and give us a future with hope.

The second point is that if we want to be freed to live a full and healthy life, to reach our God-given potential and to be a blessing to others, then we need to follow the example of the earthly life of Jesus.

By study, reflection and discussion of his life, as it is revealed in scripture, we too may be enabled to achieve the balance in our personal and parish life that is fruitful in building God's kingdom.

Let us pray:

Creator of the universe, infinite and glorious,
give us eyes to see your plan unfolding,
your purpose emerging as the world is made.
Give us courage to follow the truth,
courage to go wherever you lead,
then we shall know blessings beyond our dreams.
Then will your will be done on earth and in heaven.

Amen.

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