

SERMON FOR AGM SUNDAY 2020 | 25.10.2020

Isaiah 40: 27-31; Acts 3: 1-10; St Luke 13: 10-17

Talking to my predecessor, Fr Evan, after Jill Hetherington's funeral on Thursday, he was recalling the time a group from the parish went to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. In the order of service there was a picture of Jill carrying a cross up the winding paths of the Via Dolorosa and she got caught up in a heated argument between two locals and it was touch and go whether she would get through. *The whole pilgrimage had been jolly hard work*, he said.

And we all know that planning anything is stressful. There are always factors that were quite unforeseen; and there are always people who know best but who haven't actually been involved in the planning! The attempts to stem the spread of Covid in the north of England – however well meant – have revealed a whole series of anomalies that threaten to scupper the whole project and there are people, somewhere, burning the midnight oil, trying to sort it all out – and getting absolutely no thanks for their efforts. To claim to be 'a planner' of any sort is to play hostage to fortune: administration is not glamorous. It certainly isn't highly regarded. I wouldn't have Matt Hancock's job for anything.

Yet we can't achieve anything unless there is some kind of planning, unless someone takes the risk of mapping out a way forward. Yet anyone who understands these things knows that the key to the whole enterprise is not the early steps 1,2 and 3 but the final destination. **Where are we trying to get to, what are we trying to achieve? Without that vision there can be no movement of any kind. Where is God taking us?**

Parishes are no different to any other human endeavour. While many people will just assume they chug along in very much the same way, week in and week out, actually like any organism – especially slightly precarious voluntary organisations like churches – they have to have aims, targets and goals otherwise they find themselves being tossed about like a raft in the rapids, concerned only with their own survival.

If we, or any parish, are to make a real contribution to the community in which we are set, we have to know where we want to go. So, here at St James', we asked ourselves – as part of our Mission Action Plan – what kind of Church do we want to be? Do we feel, at this time, that God is calling us to be a niche Church with a particular character? Yes, said a very sizeable number back in 2010: *we are a particular age profile, a particular social grouping, a well educated and articulate group of people and these are the things that St James' is noted for. We must keep these traditions alive. If people don't like the way we do things then they can go somewhere else. There is plenty of choice here in London.* These were the views put to me very forcibly by members of the PCC at that time. It was the accepted direction of travel.

But there was an alternative: was it possible, we asked, for St James' to be open to everyone and anyone, whatever their background? Could we live with a much more diverse congregation, a bit less tidy perhaps, a Church with roots in all the different bits that make up Islington? Could we become an 'ordinary' Parish Church?

Over the last ten years, for those with eyes to see - and in parallel with all the changes that the Church of England has had to weather - this is what we have become. The mix of nationalities, the age profile, the educational backgrounds and the jobs that people do, have all opened up exponentially. The vision changed.

But the challenges didn't go away. To have a more pluriform community we can't just assume other members of the Church see things like we do. We have to work a good deal harder at making sure we are understood. That is what Colossians is driving at. If we were very similar to one another we are much more likely to agree. But here, now, that isn't the case so we need to really work at our attitudes so that *compassion, kindness, humility, weakness and patience* overcome our intolerance and our desire to have things done our way. It is selfless love, St Paul says, that binds everything together in perfect harmony...

That was the first bit of the vision. But the Gospel gives us part 2.

Here the question put to the much maligned planners is *Have you done your homework so that what you have begun you can also finish?*

If the new vision was to make sure that everyone was welcome – whoever they are – how could we make that possible? How did the Mission Action Plan, written all those years ago, unfold? Very slowly and in small ways. One of the first things that was done was to put a coded electronic lock on the back door of the Church and an equally good time-clock on the boiler. These things meant that the Church could be available throughout the week; all we needed was a booking system and the ability to let people in without anyone else being around. The next step: a second toilet: more people meant more of a need. After that it made sense to make the sanctuary more flexible for lots of different activities – both liturgical and performance-related. Hence the reordering. More performances meant we needed a refurbished kitchenette - and secondary glazing to keep the heat in. And if we were going to get the best out of this beautiful building, new lighting would completely change the feel of St James'. And once the lighting was done we could then see how shabby the walls and roof looked: the Church was repainted. More uses for the Church and better teaching opportunities led to the upgrade of the sound system and then to the installation of the invaluable data projector and screen...

Because we have a small but really competent team dealing with all these things, no one has been able to say: *they started but they couldn't finish*. Stage by stage the vision has unfolded and the logic of the changes has become obvious to almost everyone.

But this process is not easy, anymore than any planning is easy. It takes courage – and it requires, as Jesus said, for us to *take up our cross*. We have had to let go of the familiar and find ways to get a quart out of a pint pot. But the result: a Church discovering a new confidence as it learns to serve all parts of the community in which it is set, open in every sense of that word – making contacts day by day with local people who see their Church coming alive. Even George the painter came in the other day: he is also a roofer. *You are the people who feed the poor on Mondays aren't you? Can I help with that leak in your flat roof?* That is what happens when we catch up with the vision that God has set us here.