Sermon

Pentecost VII

28/7/19

Eltham

**Readings**

Making the transforming love of Christ known to all. (Romans 15:13) (Ephesians 3:18)

Luke 11:1-13 (Lord’s Prayer)

+FSHS

Imagine this: a quiet neighbourhood, around 2am. At the house down the street a car pulls up. Four weary travelers get out of the car and stretch: they’ve obviously been sitting for a long time, and even peering out between the blinds, the room dark behind you, you can see they’re tired. The driver goes to the front door of George’s house. You wonder to yourself about these guests arriving on George’s doorstep at such an unusual hour (we won’t comment on the fact you’re standing at the front window at 2am watching George’s house in the first place). After some persistent knocking, a light goes on, the door opens, and George, in his raggedy old PJs ushers the travelers into the house. The noise they make travels out onto the street – he wasn’t expecting these travelers – or, certainly not at this hour. Having drunk your hot milk, you get back into bed and pray you’ll be able to sleep now.

A few minutes later, there’s a banging on your front door. You jump in alarm. Robbers! Terrorists! Students! Riots! You think, and roll over, your heart pounding. The banging starts again. “Hey, neighbor!” you hear. No no, you think to yourself. I’m cosy and warm here. I don’t want to have any part of what’s going on across the road. George is a demanding neighbor, the kind of person who, when you’re short on time, bales you up in the driveway and regales you with stories about his great aunt’s cousin twice removed who had back surgery three years ago and contracted a superbug and so was unable to go to his second wife’s father’s funeral. He lives alone, is a pensioner, and you know doesn’t have a lot of resources. The banging is more insistent, and George’s voice has gone from a hoarse whisper to shouting. You throw back the blankets and open the window. “What’s up, George? We’re all asleep up here. You’re waking up the neighbourhood!” “I need your help, Peter!” You grimace in your frustration, prevaricate a moment. “Alright. Give me a minute.” You close the window, with grumpiness put on your slippers, and stomp downstairs ungraciously to throw open the door. “What do you want, George?” For all that he’s a neighbor you tolerate, you do have a soft spot for George, and your empathy is beginning to fall into its rightful place, in spite of the annoyance of disturbed sleep. “My great aunt’s cousin’s family has just arrived, and they haven’t eaten in three days…” the story goes on and you listen with a mix of weariness, sympathy, and warmth towards George. “… and I don’t have any food in the house! Please can I have some bread and milk? I’ll pay you back tomorrow.” Compassion wins out. You go to the fridge and give George all he can carry.

It’s really apposite that we have this reading today, as we draw together the last three weeks’ reflections on the Vision Plan. Not least because our year of prayer, which is part of the Vision Plan, includes a prayer derived from the disciples’ request: “Lord, teach us to pray.” And at the end of this sermon time, we’ll all be invited to commit to pray for various aspects of the Vision Plan as it unfolds in the coming months. It’s a good moment to pause and ponder the question of prayer, and what it is we are hoping for and doing in committing to hold these aspects of the Vision in prayer.

The Vision Plan 2020 is a revision of the 2017 plan, and will carry us through the next 18 months. At the beginning of 2021 it’s anticipated we’ll do a whole new plan, strongly influenced by what comes from the Pathways project. When Parish Council met in January to formulate this Plan, we started by revising the Vision and Mission statements. A Vision statement casts a Vision of what may be, what we hope to become or hope to achieve. A Mission statement sets the compass towards the Vision: it’s the set of directions, or the “how” of making the Vision a reality. And then the Plan is the “what”, what we’re going to do towards making the Vision real in a time frame. We started by looking at our values, at each parish councillor’s dream for St Margaret’s in these two years, and then scoured scripture for a touchpoint, something that spoke into the dreams, or embodied the dreams we were dreaming. Why did we do this? Because God breathes through our experience, through scripture, and through our community consensus, and those three aspects in dialogue with each other are ways God speaks to us, directing and guiding. The two scripture verses which seemed to speak most to our dreams for St Margaret’s were Romans 15:13 and Ephesians 3:18:

## Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Ephesians 3:18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Both of these verses are beautiful prayers Paul or the writer of the letter is praying on behalf of the community written to, prayers that they may be grounded in their identity as God’s beloved children, imbued with the Holy Spirit, wrapped up in the love of Christ which permeates all things, and destined for union with God. They are swept full of hope for the Roman and Ephesian Christians, and beyond them, for the communities in which they lived and worked and played. Because joy and peace in believing, and hope, and dwelling in a sense of the boundless love of Christ can’t help but overflow into the world around them. And so with us: that we may firstly be grounded in our identity, and so be those through whom God’s grace flows to the world and beyond.

From these verses and the dreams we’d articulated, we developed:

*Making the transforming love of Christ known to all.*

As a vision for St Margaret’s, that we may be a group of Jesus-followers engaged in making the transforming love of Christ known to all people, full of joy and peace and hope endowed by the Spirit of God.

We hope to do this by our Mission statement:

*To make the transforming love of Christ known, we commit ourselves to:*

* *Develop a life of prayer in which the love of Christ is experienced and responded to.*
* *Learn how to follow Jesus and encourage others to follow too.*
* *Respond to God’s call on our lives by striving to do justice (Micah 6:8) and caring for others.*
* *Foster a safe community for all people to connect with God and with each other.*
* *Open sacred space where people may discover wonder, joy, peace, and hope in relationship with God.*

These aims include the inward, outward and upward dimensions of the Vision, a threefold pattern reflected in the three Growth Intentions in the Vision Plan:

I. Pathways to community connection (outwards)

II. Growing in faith (upwards)

III. Whole Church Cohesion (inwards)

There are a set of ministry actions or projects we’re hoping to undertake in these coming months under each of the Growth Intentions. Parish councilors have been talking about these things each week. And today each of us is asked to choose between two and four areas with which we feel a connection to hold before God in prayer. Because nothing happens without first being grounded in prayer.

Which brings us back to the story at the beginning. What do we hope to achieve in holding these things before God in prayer? The reading suggests the sleeping guy got up and answered the door because of the neighbor’s persistence. The Greek word actually means something closer to “shamelessness” – ie, both the neighbour’s knocking, waking the whole neighbourhood, was shameless, as was the sleeping guy’s refusal to answer the door. In answering the door and hearing the fellow’s request (and answering it) honour is restored and given to all. What Jesus is saying here is not that God answers because of our shameless persistence – prayer is not a “put enough prayer in the slot and the goodies will drop into your waiting hands” game. And nor does God necessarily give us exactly the things we ask for – for our own good, sometimes, because we think we need something, where what we most need is something else. Rather, God honours our prayer, giving the best gifts to God’s beloved children, and the best gift of all is the Spirit who prays in us. When we pray, we are placing ourselves at God’s disposal, the Spirit moving prayer within us according to God’s will and purpose. That’s why we need to pray for these ministry actions. It may be that they take a different form in answered prayer – that too is the work of the Spirit in our midst guiding and directing St Margaret’s on the way we need to go in order to best live the realm of God. So in these coming months, let us ask, seek, and knock in prayer, that we may indeed be a community of faith making the transforming love of Christ known to all, in and through this Vision Plan.

(Instructions, and coming forward to choose ministry actions, attach to poster, attach to personal sheet.)

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**