

Rooting Deeply Now, Branching Widely Now.

Vision Sunday (24th January 2010)

Key Verse: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (John 15:8)

A man was on holiday in Italy and he walked past a building site. He asked one of the builders "What are you doing?" The builder replied "I'm cutting the stone". The tourist asked a second builder, "and what are you doing?" "I'm cutting stone for €60 a day." The tourist asked a third builder, "and what are you doing?" The third builder replied "I'm helping to build the cathedral."

Today is our vision Sunday. It's a day when we think about the wider picture. For the last few years we have had a service at the start of the year when we have explained what the big picture is for the year. What is it we're trying to achieve this year? What do we believe God wants us to achieve this year? Today is not so much about how each of the individual stones will be shaped, that will be explored as we go through the year. Today is more about the vision we have for the cathedral. What is it we're trying to build this year? What is our vision for 2010?

This year our vision started when Richard had a conviction for the lost. He spoke about this last week and we looked at Jude 20-23. Richard emphasised the sense of urgency that there is to save people who spiritually are heading for disaster. Jude talks about snatching people from the fire. There is a sense of real danger and real urgency.

The next stage was that the deacons and ministry team met together to reflect on and pray about this passage from Jude. This was a night when the whole evening was set apart for listening to God. So there were long periods of time when we listened to God individually or with a few others as suited each person and then we came back together to discuss what we felt God was saying. That first evening, every person in the room said that they felt God was calling us to outreach.

In the earlier verses of Jude's letter he talks about ungodly people among them and he says about them:

¹²These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead."

(Jude 12)

Jude describes them as twice dead; no fruit and no roots. At that same deacons meeting we thought about this also and one thing we said was that we needed to have deep roots and wide branches. That eventually led to John 15 where Jesus says we are to be his branches.

Branching Widely

Jesus said:

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it

will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

(John 15:5-8)

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are to be his branches; people bearing fruit for him, people who are reaching out to others on his behalf. We already know that this is our calling, it's what we know as 'the great commission':

"...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

(Matthew 28:19-20)

So why is God calling us to outreach this year? I mean, isn't that obvious? Isn't outreach what the church should always be about? Why this prompting from God now?

One answer to that could be that we're not doing it? It could be that God is telling us off because we know that we are to 'go and make disciples' but we haven't been doing it. Or perhaps we need to have a focus on outreach now because we live in a post Christendom world. There are still many people who are of the opinion that this is a Christian country. Sadly, I don't think we can really call ourselves a Christian country anymore. We live in a country that no longer acknowledges God. The director of Marks and Spencer was on the news just after Christmas being interviewed over customers who had ordered and paid for items online and then were contacted by Marks and Spencer to say that since they ordered the item, it had been sold out and was now out of stock and they would not be able to deliver it. The director blamed this on the number of people who were shopping online on Christmas Day saying that on average someone was placing an order with Marks and Spencer's alone once a second. Even at Christmas it seems that people are more interested in the sales than they are in the good news of Jesus Christ. Spiritually, the world around us is falling asleep and it needs a wake-up call.

When I was working for National Grid, I was on the Marketing team and one day, one of the finance guys was bragging about how successful he had been in business. He said "I've done pretty well for myself really, worked hard, made a lot of money. I think when I get to heaven I'll say to God, 'I've done well in life, I've had a successful career, I deserve a place in heaven', and I think God will agree with me." I had to tell him that I didn't agree.

Along with that are now emerging the first generations of people in the UK for centuries who do not know the gospel at all. People who don't go to church, even as a child. And as a result of that, at one of our holiday clubs we had a child who had never heard that Jesus was born in a stable. At our Summer holiday club I spoke to a boy who was trying to make his mind up about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It was the first time he had ever really thought about it.

This is the world around us, a world full of opportunity, a world that needs Jesus and we are to be his branches, reaching out into this world. As we've already seen, it's not a new calling, it's the calling that has always been there. But does that mean it's wrong? Because it's not new and wacky? Many of you will remember my ordination in September. Pat Took conducted the ordination and I remember one thing she said was that I was called to remind us of who we are. Perhaps with our vision for 2010, this is a year to remember who we are. In a world that has forgotten its creator, it is time the world was reminded. In a world that squeezes out Christian values, it's time for the church

to speak out once again. In a world where the church blends in as though it were camouflaged, it's time for the church to shine. This is who we are.

So we are to be branches that reach out to others and grow fruit.

There is a vine in Hampton Court Palace. This is what one article says about it:

The Great Vine in the Hampton Court Palace Gardens is the oldest and largest known vine in the world. Here's what the palace staff have to say about this remarkable grapevine:

The Great Vine is more than 230 years old and 36.5 meters (120 feet) long. It is believed to have been planted by Lancelot "Capability" Brown around 1768, during his time as Surveyor to George III's Gardens and Waters. The vine is also the oldest plant in the palace gardens, having come from a small cutting at Valentine's Park in Essex (which no longer survives).

The crop is usually harvested in September. It takes the Vine Keeper around three weeks to remove all the grapes. The crop averages 500 to 700 bunches of grapes that weigh 220 to 320 kg (507 to 705 lb).¹

It sounds simple doesn't it? And we can probably all imagine a thriving church, full of people who are just like me, who like the songs that I like, who have the same kind of hobbies as me, who know how to behave in church as I do. But if we are to take this calling seriously, we need to also accept that we may need to reach out to people who we wouldn't necessarily have in church, given the choice. If we're honest, we all have our prejudices. How would you respond to someone who came to church who had a heavily tattooed face and piecing? Would you be the person that sat by them? Would you invite them through for coffee? Perhaps you think 'yes, because although I would feel uncomfortable, it's my Christian duty'. But that's still a prejudice. How would you respond to someone who came to church in scruffy cloths, unwashed and smelling strongly of alcohol? How would you treat two men who came in holding hands? Or a pregnant teenager? For some it is the very rich they struggle with. What about someone who turns up in a Ferrari, wearing an Armani suit? If that does happen, I suggest we let Graham take them through for coffee (only joking).

We need to be accepting of others. Our mission statement for this church is Accepting, Developing, Belonging, in Christ. The first part of that is accepting. Accepting people for who they are. There are lots of different sorts of people who we need to reach out to. There are lots of different cultures, there are different learning styles, different personalities. In other words there is great variety and so there needs to be variety in the way we outreach. Allowing people to respond as themselves and not having to squeeze into someone else's mould before they are allowed to respond to the gospel. The fruit of the true vine comes in many varieties, not all the fruit is exactly like us.

Rooting Deeply

There are many branches but only one vine. It is important that in all that we do, our roots remain in Christ. In terms of this passage of the vine and the branches it is about our relationship with Christ, remaining attached to him if you like. Jesus said:

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

¹ <http://europeforvisitors.com/london/articles/hampton-court-palace-great-vine.htm>

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

(John 15:4-5)

It is pointless to think that we can branch out wider without rooting deeper. Is it possible to grow without much of a root? Well, the answer to that is yes. Think about the parable of the sower.

⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

(Matthew 13:5)

So it is possible for a plant to grow without much root, in fact it may even grow more quickly. However...

⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

(Matthew 13:6)

The plant without roots may spring up quickly, but it doesn't last. Jesus however said:

I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

(John 15:16)

So we need to think also about nurturing our relationship with God this year. How do we make the roots stronger, both as individuals and corporately as a church? A branch can only produce fruit if it is healthy and growing itself. If a branch isn't getting the goodness, it won't produce good fruit. And if a branch is cut off from the vine, it very quickly dies.

We need to remember that this is not our church, this is the church of Jesus Christ, we are simply the branches. We reach out and bear fruit not to bring glory to ourselves but to bring glory to him. Our verse for the year reminds us of that.

⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

(John 15:8)

Now

The final part of our vision statement is 'Now'. Which as Richard said last week, comes twice. It has to go with both statements because if we are to branch widely now then we must also root deeply now. As we have already explored, trying to branch out widely without rooting deeply at the same time will lead to fruit that doesn't last.

But there is an urgency about this that as a ministry team and diaconate we wanted to get across in the vision statement. We feel very much that God is prompting us to action. If we look back over the last few years at what our focus has been:

In 2007 we had “Going for Growth by being relevant in the 21st Century”

In 2008 we had “Building for the future”

In 2009 we had “Forward Thinking”

These have largely been about strategy and planning, now it's time for action, now it's time to put that thinking into practice. Those things we thought about that make the gospel relevant in the 21st century need to be used as we branch out. The things we thought about to do with the building may now need to be put into practice as we start to bring people in. We need spaces that are attractive and functional in order to provide the most effective outreach. The things we have thought about over the last year as we have been thinking ahead now need to be acted upon.

Now is the time for action, now is the time to stand up and be counted. Will you this year make an extra effort to deepen your relationship with God? Will you play your part in branching out to a needy world?

We can only do it together. But our vision is to be a church that is Rooting Deeply Now, Branching Widely Now.