

28 March 2010

The Purpose Driven Life – Part 7 – What have we learned? Now what?

Readings: Philippians 4: 4-9 John 4: 31-38

Was there life before 40 Days of Purpose? I had an e-mail two weeks ago from a vicar I met recently at a New Wine Day. He's looking at doing 40 Days of Purpose in his church, and asks what tips and advice can I give, from my experiences here. The answer is – quite a lot. I have learned very much on the job – and I am so grateful that God sent to this church people like Jen and Al who have experience of 40 Days in a previous church. I am also grateful to Claire (who read), to David Howard, and to Christina for all their help, prayer, suggestions, poking and prodding as we have walked these 40 Days together.

Deuteronomy 11:2, "*Remember today what you have learned about the Lord through your experiences with Him.*" We are to remember the lessons we have learned; otherwise, we have to learn them over and over and over and over. Some things we only learn through experience. And what an experience the last 40 days has been in our readings and in our services and in our groups and in our sharing, as we've looked at God's purposes. From many of the things I've heard, it's been great what God has done in you, in us. And I also know that for some it's proved challenging with questions, debate, and more. Predestination. Reward. Aspects of pain and suffering. On Tuesday I told the PCC that later this year I'll attempt to address some of these tough questions from the pulpit.

My first trip to the USA was to California. I was warned it would be a culture shock. 'Go to the East Coast – it's a culture shock. Go from East Coast to West, it's a culture shock. You're going all the way to the west coast – a double culture shock'. Then someone said 'in California, formal dress means you wear socks'. For some, Rick Warren is a culture shock – and his Southern Baptist roots have brought a particular focus in his message. That said, I have found it helpful to be reminded that we Anglicans also have preoccupations which may not lie well with other denominations. In the end, as Christians (to quote what I said earlier in this series) we are a part of that ragbag of saints and fatheads called the one holy catholic and apostolic church – that huge family of believers, with whom we'll be spending eternity.

As I have journeyed through Lent I have been amazed (I shouldn't have been) at how consistent 40 Days is with the journey this church has been on these past 4 years as we have sought to discern God's call, God's vision, for St Mary's.

Let me remind you of our Purpose Statement: 'To worship God, and to share in the community Jesus' love and message of hope'. And our Core Values:

- Prayerful – Prayer is the core foundation of the church
- Accepting – We will endeavour to be Christ-like in welcoming and responding without reserve or judgment to all people
- Caring – We reach out with unconditional good neighbourly love
- Truthful – Jesus is God’s truth and we at St Mary’s aim to live our lives in the light of that truth

Are we being obedient to that call? Are we living by our Core Values? Do we test all we do against our Purpose Statement and Core Values? Hold those questions in your mind as I speak.

In these past 40 days, what have we learned? What have we learned about God? The first thing we've learned is that it's all about **God, not me**. You were made for God, God's desire is that we come to know Him, to love Him, and that we will live with God forever in eternity, in His forever family. It's not about you. It's not about me. It is all about God. To focus on God makes us so much happier in life; that is the fundamental truth of life.

What else have we learned? Life is **preparation for eternity**. It's why God put us here, to prepare us for what He's going to do in our lives for all of eternity. One verse (amongst many) that has featured in 40 Days is Ecclesiastes 3:11: "*God has planted eternity in the human heart.*" Every one of us looks forward to an eternity, but the purpose driven life helps to prepare us for that eternity. God loves me. There's no relationship in this world that can give me significance over that fact. That proves my significance; it changes my perspective; it gives me the priorities to live for, the fact that I was made to live for eternity.

We've learned that we're put on earth **for 5 purposes**.

- Number one, I was planned for **God's pleasure. Worship**. Worship is knowing and responding to God's love, by loving Him back. The Scottish Catechism asks the question "Why was I created". And gives the answer "I was created in order to worship God and to enjoy him forever". Worship, as I have said each week, is far far more than what we do in this building. Worship of God should be our whole life, 24/7/365. And Worship is the first focus in our Purpose Statement.

- The second purpose is **fellowship** – learning to love one another, to live together in the family of God, that great multitude of believers with whom we'll share eternity. To share the love which we must (in our Purpose Statement) share in the community.

Our first call is to worship God. Our second is to love one another. Or as the Great Commandment puts it:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment.

And the second is like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (from Common Worship Communion, Order 2)

- The third purpose is **discipleship** – learning to become like Christ. Echoes of what we say about ‘Accepting’ in our Core Values. We had a teaching series on Discipleship last autumn. It takes an entire lifetime here on earth for God to build character in us, the character qualities of Jesus Christ. And as I have said before – when we die we take nothing with us – career, wealth, possessions – nothing except our character.

- The fourth purpose is **service** – learning to use our abilities to serve God. And the only way we can serve God is by serving others. We learn to use SHAPE, our Spiritual Gifts, our Heart, our Abilities, our Personality, and our Experiences for God in serving Him.

- Then the last purpose, the fifth purpose, I was made for a **mission**. "**Evangelism**." Jesus said to his followers *“Go everywhere in the world, and tell the Good News to everyone.”* (Mark 16: 15) The command of Jesus is so straight-forward and yet, so often, we do not take it to heart as Jesus would have us do. Jesus wants everyone in the whole wide world to hear the Good News of the Kingdom, and the only way that they will hear it, is when we are to make the sacrifices necessary to take it to them. “To share in the community Jesus’ love and message of hope”

What else have we learned during 40 days? We learned that we grow through **making commitments**, and we grow through **fellowship**. I am thrilled that so many have made a commitment in Lent to be part of a small group – around half the church has been in small groups at the last count, and please God not only will we all stay in our groups, but more and more will join.

We grow through fellowship. You cannot grow on your own. As Barbra Streisand sang ‘People who need people are the luckiest people in the world’. You can't love people unless you're around them. We need to be a coal, alight in the fire with other Christians.

This is why small groups are so important – small groups are a key aspect of what we believe is

God's call, God's vision, God's plan, for this church – the Plan we call our Mission Action Plan. In our first reading, Philippians 4:9, we heard "*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard, and the God of peace will be with you.*" It's as if Paul is saying, "Why would you stop doing what helps you the most?" The letter to the Hebrews emphasises this: Hebrews 10:25. "*We should not stop gathering together with other believers. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other even more.*" Why? Because we grow through fellowship.

When as a PCC we spent an Awayday together, in autumn 2006, we sensed that our lack of discerning of God's vision was our most significant weakness. Which is why so much emphasis was put on that. Our second 'weakest', if I can put it like that, was 'outward focused'. We sensed we did not turn outwards – share the gospel message in the community. Hence we must go – as our first Gathering Song said 'we must go, go to feed the hungry ...' and more. Were you surprised at the Gallup Poll I quoted last week, which highlighted people are **hungry for spiritual truth**. In England we get warned off by our culture, by fear of being laughed at, by what seems to be portrayed in the media, but the fact is the world is hungry to know God's love, to know God's purpose. To say people aren't interested is a big myth.

Look what the Jesus said in John 4:35 (our gospel reading – a different translation) "*Look around you! Vast fields of human souls are ripening all around us and they are ready now for reaping.*" Do we believe this could be true in Billingshurst? As I said last week, I honestly look forward to having a problem of too many people wanting to come together in this building than we have space for. Our total Church membership is – what? 250? How big is this village? 8,000 or more? Heaven is big enough for them all – we simply have to take forward the command of Jesus, and tell everyone of God's grace. Be outward focused. Share in the community Jesus' love and message of hope. Our Purpose Statement, again.

As we come to the end of 40 Days, there is no going back. Once we have begun our walk of Discipleship, there is no going back. It's impossible. We've journeyed, we've moved on, we're not the same – and there is no going back to the people we were. Like the people Israel during the Exodus. They followed the pillar of cloud, of fire, but they moaned and complained and looked back – looked back, through rose-tinted spectacles, at slavery in Egypt. God says you can't go back to the old way of living for things, living for pleasure, living for fun, living for prestige, living for success. You can't go back to that. Why? Because now you know the meaning of life.

I was planned for God's pleasure, so I had better worship God today. I was formed for God's family, so I had better fellowship with some other believers. I was created to be like Christ - Discipleship. I must follow Christ. I was shaped to serve God. Ministry. I was made for mission, to share the good news; therefore, I should build my life on these things. I can't go back.

As Philippians 3:16 says, "*Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it!*" I said something of this to the PCC on Tuesday. God has given us His vision for St Mary's; he has given us steps along the road, which we call our Mission Action Plan. Following, pursuing, God's vision is what I'm interested in. This is the way we're headed – and my hope, my prayer, is that we stay on track, together. If – as I suspect it may be for one or two – the journey isn't comfortable, I hope we can share the vision so you can come better on board. But there is no going back.

This is where 40 days and our Purpose Statement come so neatly together – and let me toss in here, as I have done on occasions since I first preached it, something of the desire to seek and follow God's call, God's vision, which I said in my first sermon here, on 15th January 2006.

I quote:

"Our prayer has to be 'Share your vision'. We must be confident that, if God calls us to do something, He will give us the people, the resources, to do it. Conversely, if we don't have the people, the resources, there is an implication that we shouldn't be doing something, however desirable or traditional it may be. Back in 1976 the late David Watson wrote:

"At least once a year, ruthless questions need to be asked in an attitude of prayer and submission to God about the whole pattern of our services, our meetings and organisations and buildings.

- Are they achieving anything today?
- Are they the best use of time and money today?
- Are they helping to build up the Body of Christ today?
- Are they assisting the church in evangelism today?
- Are they God's best plan for today?

Their value yesterday is not the important point. Christian work is constantly crippled by clinging to blessings and traditions of the past. God is not the God of yesterday. He is the God of today Heaven forbid that we should continue playing religious games in one corner when the cloud and fire of God's presence have moved to another."

It is a challenge to let go of things we have held dear – but sometimes, to move on, we have to. We have to release the mooring ropes before the ocean liner can sail. We no longer travel by stage-coach now we have all the modern means of transport. But equally, if we discern that what we have been, and are, doing IS building the body today, assisting evangelism, following God's plan – then let's give it our full support, our full service.

Around the church is a washing line and pegs. And against the pillars, some needs which have been identified. Don't think this is all – it is but a sample. In no order: Crèche; Road Reps; work with our teens (14-18s); Sidespeople; Choir; Welcomers; work with our children (Kids work); Transport co-ordinator; Worship band; Flower arrangers; Prayer Ministry. Over coffee, what I'd like you to do is take one of these (yes, they're cut into clothing shapes, but that's really for interest and amusement) and write on it a gift, a ministry, you can offer to the church, and peg it to the line. Anonymously. A non-monetary offering of your gifts, your ministry, your service, to God. In April, there will be a chance to go firm and public with an offering of gifts and ministries in service.

How many of you remember everything you read in the 40 Days book? None of us. Our minds have an amazing capacity to forget things. So I want to suggest that you reread the book. You could read a chapter a day again and maybe get a journal this time and maybe start writing down some of your thoughts. If you want to do it in a group again, that's fine. One member of St Mary's began reading the book a second time whilst still reading it the first time. So she was on – say – Day 22, and Day 3, at the same time. She said that she had changed, her perceptions had changed, so much in the first 20 days that she wanted to re-read. And surprise surprise, she saw things afresh, read things differently.

For some, the next thing is to **pass it on**. One of the most fundamental truths of the Christian life is this: you only keep what you give away. You will not retain the things you have learned unless you pass them on. God doesn't want you to be a reservoir. He wants you to be a funnel. If you pass it on to others - you share a truth, you write it in a letter, you send an e-mail, you give them a book, you bring them to church, whatever you do, you pass it on - then you'll keep growing.

I am thrilled with the response to 40 Days. Let me quote Romans 1:8: "*I thank my God through Jesus Christ for every one of you because the news of your faith is spreading throughout the whole world.*" Please God may that be true as we share in this community Jesus' love and message of hope – as we come before Him in prayer, as we accept all whom He sends to this church, as we care for our community, as we live in the light of His truth.

When God blesses a church like this, what is our response? Can I suggest two responses: gratitude and humility. God, we're grateful and God, we humble ourselves before you. And we're going to trust You to lead us as You lead us on.

When I came to St Mary's I was given a copy of the Prayer for the Future – it is headed Jeremiah 29:11 "*For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future". (NIV)*

Let's Pray:

Father God

As we prepare for change in the coming months,

Inspire our thoughts and guide our decisions.

Thank you for the blessings of the past.

Help us to remain

constant in prayer

steadfast in faith

and active in your service.

We ask this in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

Brian Pritchard

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