

A vision for the future

Today gives me the opportunity to preach a sermon for the first time as Vicar of Shirley. In other times and situations a new vicar in a Parish would no doubt use their first sermon as a time to set the tone for their ministry, to lay out some guiding principles as to where they see the church going in the years ahead. Here the situation is a bit different as I have been in Shirley for 3 years and know you all very well, and you also know me and some of what my thoughts about the future are. But even so it allows me to set out what I think we should be about as Christians in Shirley now and in the years to come – and it is entirely appropriate to do this in the season of Advent – a time of looking forward in hope and expectation.

My personal vision is that the churches in the parish should aim to be

- Multi-generational followers of Jesus
- Welcomers of all
- Sharers of God's love and life with the community
- And perhaps over all bringers of joy

So today I would like to say just a few words about each of these.

1. Multi-generational followers of Jesus.

This covers two things.

The first is that we as churches should be churches for all ages. It doesn't take us long to realise that at present all three of our churches consist largely of older people. We have contact with families and children through baptisms, Messy Church, Jimmy Tots and our schools work, but we have yet to see that reflected in regular week by week attendance or in a commitment to the churches. The pandemic restrictions have not helped here, but it is clear that we need to broaden the age range and this has to be a priority in all what we do and how we plan for the future.

And the second part of that first aim is that we should be followers of Jesus. This Autumn we have been running the Way of Discipleship course, and this has been about seeing ourselves as disciples, followers, apprentices of Jesus. It's what being a Christian is all about, but somehow it becomes all too easy for the church to slip into being a club with members whose allegiance is to the church rather than a commitment to following Jesus.

The image of an apprentice is a helpful one here. We know that an apprentice learning their trade spends time with their teacher watching and listening and learning. They then begin to follow their teacher's example – doing the things their teacher did in the way the teacher did them, always with their teacher in mind. So it should be with us and Jesus. We spend time with him, learn from him and follow his example in all we do. Our following of Jesus affects all we do and all we are.

2. Welcomers of all.

For many of us being in church is a familiar thing. We feel at ease in church; we are amongst people we know; the words of the service are comforting and well-known. But to many people church is an alien environment. I know lots of people are even apprehensive about entering a church building. The way we welcome people says a lot about who we are and what we think we are about. The welcome they have been given in the past is the first thing that people will remember when they think about church or the Christian faith

As an aside, the other night I had one of those disturbing dreams. I dreamt I had started a new job (I don't think it was my new role as Vicar of Shirley!). No one in the office where I was working introduced themselves to me, no one told me what they did (or for that matter what I should be doing) and no one showed me around the building. In my dream (and it was only a dream) I was disorientated and uncomfortable. I felt unwanted and unwelcome. To me it was clear that I didn't belong there.

I am sure many of us have been in situations where we have felt unwelcome. As followers of Jesus our welcome should be like his. He accepted people for who they were without judging. He always had time for people and his love and concern for them was clearly genuine and deep. And this of course goes deeper than merely greeting people as they come into a building. Remember the parable that Jesus told about the sheep and the goats where people said *when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you* and Jesus said *just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me*. As we welcome people we should imagine we are welcoming Jesus himself or being welcomed as he welcomes us.

3. Sharers of God's love and life with the community

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s, famously said *The Church is the only organisation that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.*

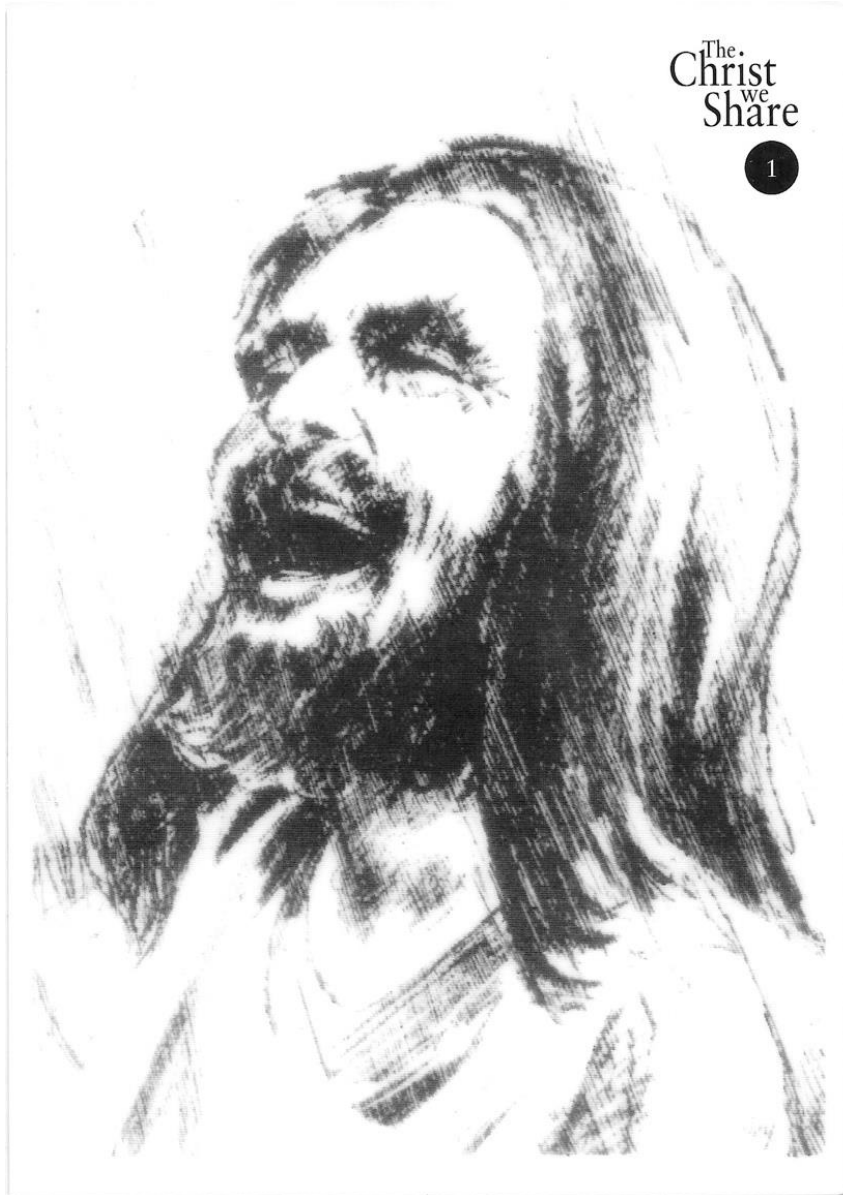
If we are serious about our discipleship, our following of Jesus, then the natural thing would be to share it with those around us. And we are very good at doing this in practical ways. Our support for the foodbank, Adavu and Narthex. The response to our request for contributions for Christmas hampers for those needy families in Birmingham, the way we have offered help to our neighbours though the lockdown.

But as followers of Jesus we are also called to talk about our faith with those around us. To share the love God has shown us with neighbours and friends; to invite others to hear about the hope we have in Jesus. Now that can sound really challenging, but I am not suggesting we should be standing on street corners shouting out the gospel message, merely that we should be open to talking about the faith that is so important to us and to inviting people to come and hear some more about it. And that ties back to welcome as well. That when those we have invited attend they should be given a welcome that encourages them to want to know more.

4. My last thought – bringers of joy.

Our Advent prayer asks that we should be hope-bringers to our community, and that is what I am thinking of here. Not a false or forced happiness, but a deep contentment of who we are; a firm belief that God's loving arms are supporting and surrounding us at all times and a trust in the hope he brings. And of course a willingness to share that contentment and peace and hope with those around us. A commitment not to be drawn into the negativity of the world but live out the positive and joyful message of Jesus.

You may recall some time back I used some images of Christ from around the world in a sermon. One of those was "the laughing Christ" from Latin America. An image which doesn't show a Jesus who condemns or criticises or sets rules for living, but one who enthuses people with a deep joy in and for life and all it has to offer.



So those are some thoughts about the future. I hope you can see there is nothing there to be feared, but there is lots to think about and pray about as God leads us forwards.

And I think that the OT reading from Isaiah 61 is an ideal reading to have with those thoughts in mind. This is the passage that Jesus read at the start of his ministry in the synagogue, when he said “today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”. What better passage then can illustrate what being followers of Jesus means

You may recall that last week we thought about how Old Testament prophecies can work across time. This prophecy was true in the time of Isaiah, it was true for John the Baptist as he urged people to turn back to God; it was

true for Jesus as he started out on his ministry and it can also be true for us today.

Let's just take a quick look at it:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

It's easy to see how those words first written by Isaiah centuries ago can apply to our situation today.

As 2020 – a year that most of us would want to forget - comes to an end it's easy to slip into the doom and gloom mindset. Will things ever get back to normal? Will things ever get better?

It seems many are all held in some kind of captivity by the virus and the measures to contain it; all around us people are broken hearted at the pain they have seen and experienced; regulations and advice confuse us and oppress us; many have lost loved ones and mourn not only at their passing, but also grieve at the sadness which meant they were not able to spend time with them before they died. Hopelessness is everywhere.

And even the hope that is present – the possibility of a vaccine – is tempered by questions like – how effective will it be? What if insufficient numbers want to receive it? How will it be distributed and administered?

But even at such a time as this we, as followers of Jesus, can be :

- Those who bring good news to all around

- Those who tend the wounds of the broken
- Those who bring freedom to people who are weighed down
- Those who bring comfort to the sad and grieving
- Those who bring hope and joy

For me and I hope for you in some way this time marks a new beginning in the life of the churches in Shirley. We look forward in hope and expectation. We commit ourselves to be followers of Jesus whose desire is to welcome and the share the life and love of Christ to all. Our aim is to be hope and joy bringers to a world in dire need of hope and joy.

As we look forward let us trust in God to lead us on and guide us in all we do and all we are.