

1 COR 13.1-3: LET'S OWN THE VISION [Chelmsford 8 January 2012]

VISION SUNDAY

According to the lectionary, today is the First Sunday in Epiphany.

However, here at Central Baptist Church we have called this Sunday when everybody is back from Christmas and New Year holidays 'Vision Sunday'.

Today is the day when we want to spell out the vision of the church for the coming year.

Centuries ago Solomon declared: '**Where there is no vision the people perish**' (Proverbs 29.18). I believe that to be true. Vision is a key motivating factor in any church.

But what is vision?

As I have stated on the front of Update, vision is clearly related to mission, but it is different.

E.g., we have said that our mission as a church is '*to go Christ's way and make disciples*'.

But in essence this is the mission of every church.

Every church is called to fulfil the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Every church is called to love others and to share the love of God with others.

There is nothing special about this mission. It is incumbent on each and every church.

Vision, however, is different.

Vision is what a church believes is their particular God-given calling within its context which is special to them. As a result, a vision is always unique.

As I have said in Update, each vision, like a fingerprint, fits the individual church that has adopted a vision of how God will work in its situation. The vision reflects not only the contextual surroundings of the church, but also the personality and giftedness of the church

As far as we are concerned, our vision is to be a strong and vibrant town-centre church.

Look at the inset in today's Update. "*As a town-centre church, we are different from most other churches. We have no particular neighbourhood to minister to – instead we see the whole town as our 'parish'. At a time when most town-centre churches are in decline, our vision is to be a vibrant seven-day-a-week town-centre church, witnessing in word and deed to the love of Jesus. We want to be strong, not for the sake of growth, but for the sake of making a greater impact on our town for Christ*"

It is within that context that we have been seeking to acquire the Frederick Chancellor Building next door with a view to turning it into a community centre.

What a difference that building could make to our witness and service as a church!

Whether or not we shall be successful in our bid to acquire the FCB, I don't know.

God willing we shall know by the end of the end of the month.

If God closes this door of opportunity, I confess I shall be disappointed – and yet it will not be the end of our vision as a church. There will be other ways for us to express our passion to serve the people of Chelmsford as a town-centre church.

A PLACE TO BELONG

Today, however, I want to speak about another aspect of our vision – and that is our vision to be “*a strong and vibrant town-centre church*” which is *passionate for others* to know and experience the love of God.

This is the context in which we have developed our strap-line, ‘*Central Baptist Church – a place to belong*’.

In a world where many are lonely, we offer friendship.

In a world where many long for community, we offer fellowship.

In a world where many feel without worth, we offer affirmation”

In one sense this is a calling for every church.

But I believe that this calling particularly relates to the personality and giftedness of our church.

There is something unusually special about our church- and that is the warmth of the welcome we give to visitors. I find it significant that almost without exception people filling in our welcome cards say that the first thing they noticed was the welcome they received.

In one sense this should come as no surprise – for in our list of values we have stated that *we want to be a genuine Jesus community, which is warm and welcoming*.

But we need to develop this aspect of our life together.

Increasingly we need to be a church where love is real – tangible – and all-inclusive; where people of all ages and of all cultures are truly welcome

In 2006 I went on sabbatical to NZ & Australia, and I returned with a dream, which sought to work out the implications of ‘going Christ’s way and making disciples’.

Let me quote to you some excerpts from that ‘dream’:

- *I have a dream of a multicultural church, where people from many nations come to worship God, where internationals find a special welcome*
- *I have a dream of a multi-aged church, where there is a place for young and old, where people of all ages feel at home*
- *I have a dream of a church full of children, where every month there is a children’s special, where children come to know the Saviour*
- *I have a dream of the church reaching out to young adults, where the evening service is contemporary in style, where the needs of the students and the new city-dwellers are met*
- *I have a dream of a church growing with seniors, where a growing number of seniors find the Saviour, where seniors grow in grace and in understanding of their Lord*
- *I have a dream of an empowering church, where the focus is on the world, and not just the church, where those in mid-life are resourced for their life in the world of work.*

Yes Central Baptist Church is the place to belong, where young and old, black and white, are at home.

We want to be more than just a welcoming church – we want to be *a welcoming church where the welcome is such that newcomers want to return, where a smile is accompanied with the offer of a meal* – where people come and stay and feel they belong.

A PLACE TO FIND LOVE

This is the context in which we will soon be running the programme that originated in NZ:
'Looking for love. Want it. Need it. Find it'.

We want to be a church where people, looking for love, wanting love, needing love, find love.
We want people to discover God's amazing love for each one of us as a result of experiencing
God's love amongst us.

People want love – people need love – people can find love here at Central Baptist Church.

This is the vision which will drive all that we do later this Spring.

For seven weeks, from Sunday 12 February to Saturday 31 March, we will be focussing on
God's love for us – and God's love for others.

To help us have time for this programme we are asking all the task-teams & committees in the
church to suspend their activities. We do not want people to have to choose between church
commitments. There will be only one commitment: Looking for Love

So what does it involve?

1. *Sunday worship*

In the first place, for seven Sundays, at both morning and evening services, we shall be
preaching on love:

1. Love and God: God loves you
2. Love and humanity: God wants us to love others
3. Love and the church: Love binds us together
4. Love and hurts: True love forgives
5. Love and perseverance: True love never gives up
6. Love and failure: True love does good even to those who let us down
7. Love and honour: True love encourages one and all

Then, for good measure, for two more Sundays we shall top up the series with

8. Love and the Cross: God could not love you more
9. Love triumphant: Nothing can separate us from the love of God

My friends, as I was preparing my sermon I felt excited by these themes – indeed, I felt really
excited. But are you? Are you excited? Are you really excited?!

If so, will you own the vision by ensuring that you are in church for each one of those Sundays?

So many people today are 'twicers', they come only twice a month to church.

But to do so, would be to miss out on what I believe God is saying to us as a church

Will you for those seven - or better still those nine – Sundays make church your priority?

Unless you have two broken legs, will you be here?

2. *10 minutes each day*

But Looking for Love is not just about Sunday services

It is also about getting hold of the Looking for Love work book and using it.

The workbook itself costs £5 and provides readings and exercises for seven weeks: at less than £1 a week this is amazingly good value, but if you have not got the money to buy it, don't worry. Just ask me for a free copy of the workbook, and I will give you it.

And if you are a couple, then I will give you two copies – one each. Why one each? Because of the intensely personal nature of some of the questions.

But of course, it is not just about getting hold of the work book – it is about using it.

Yes, I know that many of you live exceedingly busy lives – some of you even hold down two jobs – you have families to care for – and work responsibilities to fulfil.

BUT are you willing in this seven week period to give 10 minutes to God each day?

That is all I am asking: not 30 minutes, not 20 minutes, not even 15 minutes – 10 minutes.

As you will discover it is an extraordinarily practical guide to love. Who is up for it?

3. *One hour during the week*

I have a third request – and this may seem to be challenging to some

I would ask each one of you to join a small group for seven weeks

Most of these groups will meet in homes, but some will meet here at church

Most of these groups will meet of an evening, but some will meet during the day

Some of these groups may meet for two hours, but others will meet just for an hour.

Will you join one of these groups – just for seven weeks?

Why do I want you to join a group – because I believe that if people are honest with themselves and with one another, then relationships within our church could be revolutionised

In these small groups we shall be working our way through the devotional guide – where there are questions not just for individuals, but also for groups.

4. *One friend*

I have a fourth request – and this will probably be challenging to all of us

Will you try and bring along at least one non-church friend to one of these groups?

We can't force our friends to come – but we can give them an opportunity to discover God's love for them, as also discover how in practice we might love one another.

The fact is that there are many people looking for love, wanting love, needing love.

Are you prepared to be the channel through which they find love?

LOVE IS WHAT COUNTS

Goodness, I am almost through my sermon, and yet I have not expounded Scripture.

Let me rectify this by reading three verses from Paul's so-called 'hymn to love'

It is a passage of Scripture which is often read at weddings
But in fact it was written for a dysfunctional church which needed to discover how to love one another.

“I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains – but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt – but if I have no love, this does me no good” (1 Cor 13.1-3)

Here we have a fascinating passage of scripture.

Have you ever noticed the careful way it is constructed?

In each verse there is a two-step heightening. Paul begins each sentence with a remarkable gift, and then moves on to a truly amazing gift – and then says: however remarkable and amazing our gifts and behaviour may be, without love they are worth nothing. Love is indispensable. As far as God is concerned, everything minus love equals nothing!

Let’s look at these statements and apply them to church life today

- When Paul writes: **“I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell”** (13.1), he is targeting an unbalanced emphasis on speaking in tongues. The fact is that a spiritual rave-up without love has less value than a Hoffman symphony for vacuum cleaners.
- Paul goes on: **“I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all the knowledge and understand all secrets”** (13.2a). Wow, that hits most of us ministers under the belt. Preaching may be important, the use of the mind may be important, but even a Billy Graham without love is of no use at all
- **“I may have all the faith needed to move mountains - but if I have no love, I am nothing.”** (13.2b) The faith that Paul has in mind goes hand in hand with the gift of healing. But even if we are causing people to throw away crutches by the truck-full, if there is no love, then..
- And says Paul **“I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt - but if I have no love, this does me no good.”** (13.3) According to Jesus self-denial is at the heart of Christian discipleship: yet even the most dedicated follower of Jesus is a failure without love.

Yes ***love is of the essence of the Christian life.*** *“Love is the principle, the paramount, the pre-eminent, the distinguishing characteristic of the people of God”* (Stott)

Compared to love, all else is secondary.

You may have all kinds of spiritual experiences, you may have all the gifts rolled into one - but without love, they are as nothing.

What’s more, the kind of love Paul has in mind, is not the ‘gushy’ ‘touchy’ ‘smoochy’ type of love you might see in a Hollywood film. No, it is the love which truly cares, the love which gets its hands dirty, the love which gives rather than gets.

This is the kind of love which alone has any worth.

And, of course, this is the kind of love which we see in Jesus.
Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us
Jesus who died for you not because of who you are – but simply because you are.

This is the love which we shall celebrate around the Lord's Table in a moment.
This is the kind of love which we shall seek to share through our 'Looking for Love' programme.
This is the kind of love which people are seeking today.

If you don't believe me, then listen to Julian Lennon, the son of John Lennon of Beatle fame, as he sings the song: 'I'm looking for love'

Why do you always look the other way
when I'm trying to see your soul
I want a love that grows in every way
But my heart can't find resolve

I just want peace of mind
with a love I can depend
with a lover and a friend
I need to find someone
with the purest heart and mind
It's the hardest thing to find

I'm looking for love
but I'm searching in all the wrong places
Oh God from above
can't you help me see through all these faces?

I want to feel that feeling deep inside
when my heart begins to burst
I want to find a love that's not a lie
So I know that I'm not cursed

I just want peace of mind
with a love I can depend
with a lover and a friend
I need to find someone
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