

1 PETER 2.4-5: MY VISION FOR THE CHURCH

[Chelmsford 2 September 2012]

It has been said: *“To be an effective pastor and leader is to be dissatisfied with the present... and to be willing to nurture and guide a church into its future. Prov 29.18 says, ‘Where there is no vision the people perish’. But the leaders usually die first. The people lose their vision because the leaders have lost theirs”* (Walter Bennett).

Thank God, I am still well and truly kicking - I have not lost my vision.

I long to see our church become an increasingly strong and vibrant city-centre church where every member is passionate for God, for one another and for others; where every member is passionate to grow in the faith and to serve Jesus.

The only question is: will you share my dream?

This morning I want to root my dream in Scripture.

And since we are beginning a new series in 1 Peter, I want to root the dream in Peter’s vision for the church. Let me read 1 Peter 2.4-5 again to you and see whether with me you can discern four marks of a living church.

"Come to Jesus as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ".

1. AN EVANGELIZING CHURCH

"Come to Jesus" writes Peter.

The first mark of a living church is to call men and women to Jesus.

Evangelism is the first priority of a church.

"As fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission" (Emil Brunner).

Evangelism is the heart beat of any church.

The moment a church ceases to evangelize, that moment it dies.

Compared with evangelism everything else is like re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

A little later in v9 Peter writes: **"You are ... chosen... to proclaim the wonderful acts of God who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light"**.

And that is true of us too. We as a church are called to share what God has done for us.

What has God done for us? **"He gave us new life"**, says Peter, **"by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope"** (1.3)

Death is not the end, says Peter - but it is the beginning of a new and larger life.

If ever there was good news for a dying world, this is it.

My dream is to see every member of our church passionate to share with others what Jesus means to them – passionate to see friends and family won to Jesus Christ – and as part of this passion passionate to bring people into the life of our church.

This autumn we have a host of opportunities:

- Alpha begins on Monday 1 October
- Wellsprings, a bridge-building pampering course for ladies, begins in mid-October.

But we don't have to wait until next month. There are opportunities this month.

If you read September Team Talk you will discover that we have designated the last two Sundays of September as Big Welcome Sundays

- Sunday 23 September is Harvest
- Sunday morning 30 September is a baptismal service

I dream of everybody in our church inviting at least one friend to one of these special services.

Did you know that according to a recent survey undertaken by Tearfund, there are three million people in the UK who would come to church if only they were invited?

The challenge of the 'Big Welcome Sunday' is for each one of us to give a personal invitation to a friend to come along with us and give church a try.

For some people Harvest might be a draw, for others it might be a baptismal service – why not give your friend a choice? What a difference it would make if each one of us prayed for a friend – and then stepped out in faith and invited the friend to church!

Come to Jesus, says Peter – yes, let's bring friends to Jesus

Back in 2006 when I returned from my Sabbatical 'down-under' I wrote:-

*I have a dream of an evangelising church
Where people want to bring their friends
Where baptisms are a frequent event
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

My friends, it is up to you – for only you can make my dreams come true!

2. A GROWING CHURCH

"Come to Jesus and.... let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple"

A second mark of a living church is that it is a growing church.

When people come to Jesus, they are built into a spiritual house or 'temple'.

Inevitably, the more that come, the bigger the house becomes.

Church growth is a by-product of effective evangelism.

The fact is that nobody can be a Christian in isolation.

When we come to Jesus, we are called to commit ourselves to God's people.

Luke tells us that on the day of Pentecost those who responded to Peter's preaching were **"baptised and added to the church"** (Acts 2.41 NRSV).

Baptism and church membership are not optional extras - they are part of the conversion process.

When I first came to Chelmsford in 1993 our church was in massive decline

Our high watermark had been in 1982 when the membership had risen to 582 – but then, as people became dissatisfied with traditional ways of doing church, decline set in.

By the time I arrived there were still over 400 members on the books, but like some of these

members had not darkened the door of the church for years.

The fact was we needed to change if we were to survive, let alone to grow – and change we did. We not only radically changed the way we did church, we also changed the premises.

But in the process we whittled down the membership to 250.

It was a very painful time.

However, as in the natural world, so in the life of a church, radical pruning is often needed before growth can occur. Growth came and today we have some 371 members.

But I long to see the church grow more.

I long to see more not for growth's sake, but that we might make more of an impact upon our city. With a bigger church, we could launch out in yet more programmes, and become even more effective as a church.

Yes, I dream of a growing church.

Indeed, my dream is to see the church grow to 400 members before I stand down as pastor.

This is not an impossible dream – only 30 more members.

But it will take effort. For growth doesn't just happen

It happens as a church makes a conscious effort to go for growth. In the words of Kent professor Robin Gill, "*Churches in Britain need to make urgent choices about structure and direction... They need to be more single-minded about growth... about how they might reach the nine out of ten people in Britain who seldom or never go to church*".

Back in 2006 I wrote:

*I have a dream of a growing church
Where the crowds necessitate yet another congregation
Where growth dictates yet further building
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

My friends, it is up to you – for only you can make my dreams come true!

3. A RELATING CHURCH

"Come to Jesus as living stones and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple" – or as the NRSV: "be yourselves built into a spiritual house".

How do you build a house?

You don't fling bricks into a pile, but rather you fit them carefully together.

A house is more than a pile of bricks - it is an actual construction.

Bricks are carefully placed upon bricks - indeed more than placed - bricks lock into bricks - bricks support bricks.

Here is a picture of the church. A church is more than a crowd of people.

A church is a company of people who are committed to one another.

A church where people simply meet in serried ranks of chairs is not a strong church.

The fact that this morning our church is almost full is not a sign that we are a strong church.

Strength is not found in numbers - strength is found in togetherness.

Strength is found as we relate to one another - pray for one another - care for one another -

bear one another's burdens - encourage one another - as bricks as it were lock into bricks. Yes, if we are to be a strong church we need to relate meaningfully to one another.

Needless to say, we cannot relate to all and sundry.

No brick can relate to every brick in the house - otherwise the building would collapse - it would no longer stand up.

I am told that in a house there are normally only six bricks touching any given brick - some supporting the brick, others being supported by the brick.

What is true of a physical building is also true of the spiritual house which is the church.

We cannot relate in with everybody in the fellowship - or at least, not in a meaningful way.

There is a limit to the number of people whom we can meaningfully support.

But this is no excuse for not relating at all.

All of us need to be in some kind of small group, where the members support one another.

Home groups are vital to our spiritual health..

At the moment we have 21 groups made up of some 201 people.

That's a great statistic. But suppose we had 30 groups made up of 300 people – or even better 40 groups made up of 400 people.

These are not impossible figures. There is a church in Sheffield with 360 home groups.

As you will see from Team Talk this term we have a great programme ahead of us

Life on the Frontline is a six week course for equipping 'whole-life' disciples.

It starts from the basis that 98% of the church spends 95% of their time on their 'frontlines' in the world, and suggests ways in which as Christians we can engage with our 'frontlines'. It is a highly innovative and creative course. Each of the sessions begins with a short DVD: after each session there is a takeaway sheet for people to use between sessions to pray, reflect, and act on the insights from that sessions.

In the words of the blurb, '*What if we gathered to worship on Sunday as God's missionary people and scattered on Monday as his missionaries in the world? What if we gathered again with stories of what God has done?*'

This is not a high-powered course for enthusiastic evangelists, but rather a down-to-earth course for ordinary Christians in need of help to live fruitfully for Jesus in their lives beyond the church.

Come, says Peter, and "**be built into a spiritual house**"

Church is not just a place to attend, it is a place to belong..

As I expressed my dream in 2006:

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*I have a dream of a church made up of small groups
Where everybody feels they belong
Where everybody feels free to share and not to feel ashamed
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Again, my friends, it is up to you – only you can make my dreams come true!

4. A WORSHIPPING CHURCH

"Come to Jesus...and serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to

God through Jesus Christ".

Worship it has been said is "*the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian church. It alone will endure into heaven, when all other activities of the church have passed away*". Sunday by Sunday we anticipate heaven by worshipping together.

In the words of the ancient Sursum Corda: "*Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, forever praising you and saying: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!"*"

Worship is a form of celebration in which we celebrate the mighty acts of God in Christ. Worship is like drinking champagne – no one in their right mind drinks it alone – you drink it with others to celebrate a happy event. Yes, we can worship God on our own – but it is so much better to be with ours.

For me one of the joys of belonging to Central is that we are able to celebrate the faith in style – we have great musicians who help us to celebrate the faith Sunday by Sunday. But worship doesn't just happen because we have great musicians. It involves determination and effort on our part. In Peter's terminology here, worship involves the offering of "**spiritual sacrifices**" to God. A sacrifice by definition involves cost of some kind. Here I don't have in mind the cost involved in giving – although that is undoubtedly part of our worship – but the cost of making worship a priority.

When I was a young minister 'twicers' were people who came to church twice a Sunday. Today 'twicers' are people who come to church twice a month. Indeed, there are many in our church who come regularly to church once every three weeks. I dream of the day when every member comes to church every Sunday to worship God. Yes, I know that there are Sundays when we cannot be at church – we are unwell – we are at work – we are away on holiday..... But the reality is that some of the excuses we give just don't hold water. If worship was really our number one priority, then we would come to church first – and then visit friends, then attend a family birthday party, then go out for the day as a family.....

At a time when the combined Sunday worship attendance rarely exceeds the membership of our church, I dream of the day when the Sunday morning worship service rarely falls below 371. Friends, that is not an impossible dream. If we see worship as of the very essence of discipleship, then we will be there.

In the words of my sabbatical dream

*I have a dream of a worshipping church
Where God is at the centre of our life together
Where Sunday is a day not to be missed
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Again, my friends, it is up to you – for you alone can make my dreams come true. Will you share my dream?

Yes, will you share my dream of being an evangelizing, growing, relating, and worshipping

[1 Pet 2.4-5]

church? If so, what a difference that will make to our church this autumn.