

JOHN 20. 21-22: GOING CHRIST'S WAY IN 2011

[Chelmsford 9 January 2011]

'Hallo!' said Piglet, 'what are you doing?'

'Hunting', said Pooh.

'Hunting what?!'

'Tracking something', said Winnie-the-Pooh very mysteriously.

'Tracking what?', said Piglet coming closer.

'That's just what I ask myself. I ask myself, "what?"'

'What do you think you'll answer?'

'I shall have to wait until I catch up with it', said Winnie-the-Pooh.

Last year we invited Nick Cuthbert to be our external consultant. One of his findings was that there was a good deal of confusion in people's minds about our 'purpose' as a church. Indeed, he stated that "the majority of people I asked could not tell me the mission statement of our church". In other words, most of us were somewhat like Winne the Pooh – loveable in nature, but somewhat confused as to what we were doing. Or to use a different imagery, the church is like a football team engaged in a 'game' on a field without goal posts, where the players are content to kick and pass the ball, but no one tries to score.

Frankly I thought that Nick Cuthbert was being somewhat hard on us.

And yet, as we talked through his findings as a leadership team, we wondered whether Nick Cuthbert was indeed onto something.

There is a lack of clarity when it comes to mission and vision within our church.

So, today on what I have entitled 'VISION SUNDAY', I want to re-state the mission and vision of our church. And I want to do so on the basis of the *Great Commission* found at the end of John's Gospel.

1. OUR MISSION IS TO GO CHRIST'S WAY

The Great Commission?

Yes, do notice I speak of the *Great Commission* as found in John's Gospel.

Normally, when we speak of the Great Commission, we have in mind the words of the Risen Lord Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "**Go to all people's everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you**" (Matt 28.19-20).

But there is a somewhat different form of the commission to be found in John, which according to the great evangelical Bible expositor, John Stott, is even greater.

Jesus said to his disciples: **“Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you”** (John 20.21).

Let me quote John Stott to you:

“Jesus sends us ‘into the world’ to identify with others as he identified with us... to become vulnerable as he did. It is surely one of the most characteristic failures of us Christians, not least of us who are called evangelical Christians, that we seldom seem to take seriously this principle of the Incarnation... It comes more natural to us to shout the gospel at people from a distance than to involve ourselves deeply in their lives, to hink ourselves into their culture and their problems, and to feel with them in their pains. Yet this implication of our Lord’s example is inescapable” (Christian Mission In The Modern World).

I believe that John Stott is right. This is a far more challenging understanding of mission. Yes, of course we are called to make disciples – but there is more to mission than telling others of God’s love, we have also to show others God’s love.

“As the Father sent me, so I send you”.

Jesus was more than a preacher – he fed the hungry, he healed the sick.

Yes, he told the parable of the Prodigal Son, but he also told the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

He not only told people to love God, but also to love their neighbours as themselves.

The fact is that words are sometimes not enough.

Just as the Word had to be made flesh, so our words have to be backed up by actions.

So should we speak of John 20.21 as the Great Commission?

On reflection that is perhaps too confusing – for most of us have grown up calling Matt 28.19,20 as the Great Commission.

Perhaps we should say that Jesus’ commission here in John 20.21 effectively encompasses not just *the Great Commission* (Matt 28.19,20) but also the *Great Commandment* (Matt 22.37-40) to love not just God, but also to love our neighbours as ourselves.

We learn from Jesus here in John 20 that mission involves both evangelism and social action.

We exist to go Christ’s way

Our ‘mission’ statement as a church is based on John 20 as also upon Mattt 28.

Our mission is **“To go Christ’s way and make disciples”**.

It is this holistic understanding of mission which causes us to run our two clubs for people with mental health problems as also our child contact centre for broken families. For the most part these are not disciple-making activities – but rather opportunities to show the love of God to vulnerable people.

Yes we believe in making disciples – this is the reason for Alpha; this too is the reason for our work amongst children and young people – we long to see them commit their lives to Jesus in the waters of baptism. But we want them too to show the love of Jesus to others.

At a recent leadership team meeting we spent a good deal of time considering whether we should simplify our present mission statement. Is it too complicated? Does everybody understand what we mean when we say: we exist to go Christ's way and make disciples".

Would it be better to say:

- 'We exist to share the love of Jesus in word and action'; or
- 'We exist to live and share the love of Jesus'; or
- 'We exist to share the love of Jesus by who we are, what we say, and how we live'; or
- 'We exist to share, live and love Jesus'?

In the end we decided to not to change our mission statement.

We felt that none of our simpler versions did justice to the underlying theological bed-rock of our mission.

As a church we want to 'go Christ way and make disciples'

Indeed: we don't just want – we are convinced that we have to go Christ's way and make disciples. This is our mission.

What do we mean by the term 'mission'? This is why we exist as a church.

As a church we exist to show God's love in word and action.

Do you agree?

Our chief reason for coming together as a church is not to offer worship to God, nor is it to enjoy fellowship with one another, but rather to engage in holistic mission.

As a church we exist not for ourselves, but for others.

In the words of William Temple, the church is the only institution which exists for the sake of its non-members. A golf-club exists for the sake of its members, a fitness club exists for the sake of its members, a slimming group exists for the sake of its members – but not the church.

To quote another theologian: "*As a fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission*" (Emil Brunner). Mission is of the essence of the church.

The church is the church in so far as it goes out in mission.

The only reason for the continued existence of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, is "*to go Christ's way and make disciples*"

Unlike Winne-the-Pooh, we are not just 'hunting' – we are on a mission!

2.. OUR VISION OF GOING CHRIST'S WAY IN 2011

It is in this context of this mission statement – to go Christ's way and make disciples - that as a leadership team we have developed our vision statement.

We want to be a strong and vibrant town-centre church where every member feels

- *Passionate for God*
- *Passionate for one another*
- *Passionate for others*
- *Passionate to grow in the faith*
- *Passionate to serve Jesus*

Let me spell out the vision which underlies this vision statement

First of all, we want to be a vibrant town-centre church

When in the mid-1990s we began to consider redeveloping our church, we were faced with a choice. We could either sell our building and build a new church on the edge of town where we would have plenty of parking; or we could redevelop our building on Victoria Road South and remain a town-centre church.

It was tempting to do a Sainsbury's and move to Boreham or wherever – what a difference it would make for people not to struggle with parking on a Sunday.

However, as a church we believed that God wanted us remain where we were.

As a result, we redeveloped our building to provide a mission facility, fit for serving our town in the 21st century. Yes, that was the vision underlying Building for the Future.

The congregations might have increased more had we moved to Boreham – but we could not have served the community in the same way. We can only run our mental health clubs and our child contact centre because we are a town-centre church.

As a result of our commitment to town-centre ministry, we have developed our ministry of lettings, which is not just an opportunity to make money – but rather an opportunity to serve our community.

It is precisely because we want to go Christ's way and make disciples that we have become a church open seven days a week – most days open from 8.30 in the morning until 10 o'clock at night.

In this respect we are different from neighbourhood churches.

We are also different from most town-centre churches.

I am proud of the fact that we are a vibrant town-centre church – and my vision is to see our church become an even more vibrant town-centre church.

Let me let you into a confidence, which I do not want reproduced in the Essex Chronicle.

Over the last month or two the leadership team has been looking into the possibility of buying the Frederick Chancellor Building, and as a result extending our ministry in the town.

There are all kinds of possibilities – all we need is money.
The FCB is in a mess – it would cost at least £1 million to put it right.
But just let your imagination run free and think what we could do if we had more space – what an impact we could make for Jesus upon our community.
At the moment people still pass our church and are not aware of us as a church.
But think of all the new frontage we could gain – of all the room we would gain.
True, there would still be no parking – but we could serve Christ so much more creatively.
I could go on – the reality is that the issues involved are not simple – all being well, we shall begin to think together at the next church meeting about the wisdom or otherwise of taking such a massive step of faith at a time of financial austerity.

Secondly, we want to be a strong town-centre church

We are already a strong church – certainly as far as English Baptist churches are concerned, with a membership of around 365 we are a so-called ‘larger church’.

But I long to see us become even stronger. I look to see us break the 400 membership barrier. Why? Is it because it would do something to my self-esteem?
No, because it is larger churches which are best fitted to impact their communities for Christ. Just think of how much more we could do if we had another 100+ members.

The fact is that larger churches tend to be more effective in making disciples - Peter Brierley, an expert in Christian statistics, has shown conclusively that it is not the smaller but the larger churches which are proportionately winning more people to Jesus and his church

Furthermore, it is larger churches that tend to have the people- resources for holistic ministry. The fact is that at the moment we are already stretched in terms of people to run our Oasis Cafe, to run Monday club & Victoria Club etc. If we are to continue to serve our community at the present level, let alone to expand our services, then we need more people – and only a larger church can provide more people!

Also, it is larger churches that are able to provide the ministerial resources for mission. We need to dream of further growth – and to work to make that possible.

Thirdly, we want to be a church on fire for God

Numbers alone of course will never be the key to effective ministry. Effective ministry arises from people who are passionate for God, for one another, and for others.

I love the word *passion* – it speaks of fire in the belly.

My mind goes to Paul writing to Timothy: **‘Stir into flame the gift from God which is yours through the laying on of my hands. For the spirit that God gave us is no cowardly spirit, but one to inspire power, love and self-discipline’** (2 Tim 1.6,7 REB)

I think too of his words to the church at Rome, when in Rom 12.11 he urges them to serve the Lord **“with unflagging zeal, aglow with the Spirit”** (REB).

Or of his words to the church at Thessalonica: “**Do not restrain the Spirit**” (1 Thess 5.19: or in other versions such as NRSV: ‘Do not quench the Spirit’).

"All things in moderation" may be a useful maxim in the world - but not in the church.

My dream, my vision for the church, is to see each member of the church truly on fire for God.

3. OUR RESOURCE FOR GOING CHRIST’S WAY

Let me end this sermon by drawing your attention to Jesus’ promise of his Spirit.

Jesus did not simply say: “**As the Father sent me, so I send you**”.

He breathed upon his disciples and said “**Receive the Spirit**”.

Jesus does not leave us to our own resources to fulfil our mission. He gives us his Spirit.

Indeed, this is why he gives us his Spirit. He gives us his Spirit that we might have the resources to go the way of Christ – he gives us his Spirit that we might have the resources to be a vibrant, strong, town-centre church, passionate to share with others the love of Jesus.

Let us this year open up ourselves in a new way to the presence and power of the Spirit, so that we may fulfil our mission and realise our vision!