

# What Next?

## The Five Marks of Mission

### 3rd Mark - Tend

Given on the 25<sup>th</sup> October by Jan Rogers

Respond to human need by loving service

Come with me on a journey if you will...

Today, as we are only too aware, is a very special day! For those of you who are visiting and haven't got a clue about what I am referring to, well, today is the 25th anniversary of our Church's brave step into a whole new way of being. As we stand here in October 2040 we remember those brave souls who, back in 2015, having gone through the process of reflecting around "what next?" were able to step into the unknown and pave the way for what we are today. We are, of course, a thriving group of people who are totally immersed in our local community and beyond.

If it wasn't for those people our church might have died a slow and painful death- something that they were very aware of, and decided to do something about. Records from the time reveal that it was actually very difficult for them. The congregation was primarily an ageing one and many people were tired. They had just been through a major renovation of this beautiful building and it's testament to all involved that it has weathered as well as it has. To come out of that and then be challenged about "what next", must have been an awfully big ask.

We know that many good things were happening at the time, but that process of evaluation has led to many more new initiatives, not least our 4 church plants. Currently, our total population amounts to 300,000 people and counting. Some of you here, who were children in the Sunday school at the time, have a lot to be thankful for, as indeed we all have. For those who are no longer with us, do you think that they would have envisaged the solid re-connection between Church and State working together to protect the vulnerable of our world. How lovely that representatives from this church sit on that important committee of advisors to our government, a government who take seriously the Church's concerns and act accordingly.

Well, back to reality people, because, fortunately for some of us ageing folk, we are still in 2015. But what a vision! My question to you now is... do you believe in the possibility of it? I'd like to think that I do. The reality too is that no matter how old we are we can all believe that we have something to contribute towards it and this is the challenge set before us.

My remit today is to enable us to think about the 3rd mark of mission: "To respond to human need by loving kindness." As Christians this is something that we must all strive to do. It is something that we are commissioned to live out in our everyday lives. However, , for whatever reason, there may be times when we don't always get it right as individuals, whether this applies to our intimate relationships, or within our

homes or our communities but, never the less this, hopefully, remains a work in progress. Considering our "work in progress", we witness some of the fruits of this work in our church in the form of our pastoral visiting group, ministry to the sick, our Sunday school, Wednesday lunches and knit and natter. We see it in the various social groups and events we plan. We see it in the good work of our Church Hall Committee and in our valuable prayer ministry... yes, we have a lot to be thankful for, haven't we?

But, and there has to be a but doesn't there. You see, in order for our church to grow and not die a painful death, we ALL have a responsibility to continue to work together to make it happen. Difficult as it may seem, unless we are prepared to take a step into the unknown no one will be thanking us in 2040.

I don't know about you, but in this secular age, I struggle to know how to make connections between Church and people who either sit on the edge of faith or reject it completely. For many, our Churches are either perceived as religious institutions that cause more harm than good, or we are a cosy little place to step into occasionally to have the baby done, get married, buried or join in the pleasantries of Easter or Christmas. It's easy for us too, and less risky, to band together in this place where we can readily share faith, fellowship and mutual interests and to offer others what we think they want. It's easy for us to keep on doing just what we are doing isn't it? It's easy not to consider change and our part in it. Change, you see, makes demands of us and, yes, for change to be effective, it demands that we give it our all. We are not called to simply sit back and open our doors for others to join us in our endeavours. Responding to human need by loving service means more than that.

To understand what love in action means in its fullness we need look no further than the Ministry of our Lord, Jesus. In our Gospel reading from Mark today we are witness to a day of events in Capernaum. It's a full-on day by the look of it as we see Jesus teaching, healing and preaching. His faith, His prayer and His constant obedience to His calling are qualities which we are called to emulate as we follow Him. Through his actions that day he sets us an example of what it means to roll up our sleeves and get on with the job. All are ways in which the presence of Jesus proclaims and embodies the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth.

But it seems that this account has much more to teach us here than simply observing what is before us. In the opening scene we see Jesus leaving the synagogue and entering a home in real need of healing. He took what he was about in His place of worship and used the power of it to bring God's power into the service of human need. One interpreter has this to say about the scene: "All too often, people, as they go out, leave the truth behind in the sanctuary, like the hymnbooks that are stamped 'Not to be taken from the Church' ". Will we do the same?

Secondly, we we hear that this man Jesus is performing wonderful works; He is building up a reputation for himself. He cared without exception, He gave hope to the hopeless and healing to the sick. Note: "...the whole city was gathered together". That street in Capernaum could be my street, or your street, it could be central Reading... it could be anywhere in our world really. The point is that despite the passage of time, people are still desperate for hope in what may look like a hopeless world, they are still desperate for healing of body, mind or spirit. And we, yes you and I and St Michael's, have something very special to offer them. We have the opportunity to build a great reputation for the Christian faith and our church in this place. So, whilst this is a challenge, it is also a fantastic opportunity. We have a wealth of resources, we have an abundance of experience in the people that we are, whether healthy or broken in some way ourselves.

Henri Nouwen, that gifted priest and spiritual writer, talks beautifully of his own struggle to follow Jesus. In his book "Walk with Jesus" Nouwen reminds us that Jesus walked with the poor and vulnerable as he continues to walk with them now. He asks the question about what it means to walk with the poor, the blind, the sick, the mourners and those who have lost hope. The answer he gives? "It means to recognise my own poverty: my deep inner brokenness, my fatigue, my powerlessness, my mortality."

We too then must recognise our own fragile vulnerability in our attempt to walk the long and often painful journey with others. In all of that, I encourage you to ask yourself this question: "What do I need?" Chances are, if you can begin to answer that question, you may begin to have some insight into the needs of others and have some chance of meeting them. After all, whether we recognise it or not, we all have our vulnerabilities... Jesus was painfully aware of that as He struggled with His own and His own response.

With this in mind and reflecting on our reading, I think that there is another lesson to be learned here too and one that we should be mindful of before we attempt to do anything. We often witness Jesus withdrawing to a quiet place to be alone, to pray. This reveals not only His Jewishness but his humanity and the importance of work, rest and prayer. We see Him withdraw in times of stress and in times of temptation, praying as He does to His Father for strength and for guidance. He has learned to draw some balance in His life and this is something that I think we are being reminded of as important for us too.

So, having recognised that loving service must begin with the care we give to our own wellbeing, the next challenge is around how we might be more relevant in the lives of all in our community and beyond.

I spoke earlier about the great ministry we already offer here at St Michael's. But, we live in a rapidly changing world, a world that requires that we keep up with it. Whilst we might struggle with the idea of change, my own sense here is one of great excitement. We have the freedom to do what we want and we have a fantastic base camp to have our command centre in don't we. We just need to employ a bit of strategic thinking. Well, let's think about it! We have a warm comfortable and secure home here and we are able to offer hospitality on so many different levels. Many people of all ages come through our doors every year and all are in need of something. I wonder how we might network with them more effectively?

I wonder if parents who bring their children to be baptised might like the opportunity to meet here with other parents? Might they like some quality time together without the children to share a meal or a coffee? Could we help them to learn to cook more nutritious meals for their family in our kitchen. Maybe there is need for a food bank? Do we have room for the newly-weds? I wonder what they might need or want... should we ask them? What about those who are bereaved? Might they value the time to meet together to support one another... might you have the time to listen and share a cup of tea and a piece of cake with them? I'm also mindful of the many locally funded community projects, designed to support the vulnerable in some way, but now disappearing as the funds run out. Can we bridge the gap? So many opportunities for service right here for those out there. I hope that these questions stimulate your own thinking about the many ways in which our our beautiful home might be used. After all, it's not a museum, even if the potential is there for it to become one in the end.

To finish, I'd like to leave you with some words from Bob Jackson, previous Archdeacon of Walsall and Growth officer for the Diocese of Litchfield. In the closing chapter of his book: "The Road to Growth", he has this to say: "At this time in this national Church the sense is that reform and renewal is where God is taking us. The road to growth is an unglamorous road. The gradient is undulating and the view ahead winds only slightly uphill. It's a long road, not for the impatient quick-fix merchants. Not many of us are athletes- we may be spiritually fit enough to walk, but we are a bit arthritic for running. ... We squabble amongst ourselves about the direction we should take. Yet, miraculously, we remain in every place and are gaining ground in many... Left to our own devices we would have folded years ago. God has not given up on us. He has given us the internal resources and the social climate in which renewing growth can become the normality. As we faithfully serve this vision, who knows what God can do with us?"

Indeed, who knows...Let's see, shall we? Amen.