

Candlemas 2020 – Sean Semple’s Sermon on Vision

The year 2020 will be remembered in the history of this country as the year of Brexit, the year in which Britain set and embarked upon a new political and economic course. At the beginning of 2020, the parish of St Mary did not so much want to change course, but ensure that it was on the right course, and so last week parishioners gathered to ask God to set our spiritual compass at our Parish Vision Day. This was both an obvious and a radical thing to do: obvious in that we are a Christian church, and we need to ask God what God wants for our church, rather than telling God what we are going to do with his church; radical in that we actually believed that God would speak to us and guide us.

Forty-three people attended the Vision Day on the 25th January, and last Sunday we invited those who couldn’t attend but wanted to contribute, to prayerfully engage with the same material we had used at the Vision Day and to feed back to us what they felt God was saying to them.

Today I am going to share with you what people believe God has been saying to them, to give you a chance to see how it sits with you, what it inspires or evokes in you, so that you too can be part of the discernment process. A full summary has been made available to you, and I strongly encourage you to take this away and to prayerfully reflect on it.

Over the course of the next month, our preachers will refer to what came out of the vision day, looking at implications, teasing out themes, providing opportunities for us all to continue discerning what God is saying to St Mary’s, so that by next month a clear direction, a clear statement of who we are and where we are going will emerge that can then be formally adopted by the PCC and by our Annual Parochial Meeting in April. This Vision will then direct every aspect of parish life going forward.

The first thing that people feel they are hearing from God is that ... **“God cares about all people... all ages, all backgrounds...”** which might sound a bit obvious but listen to the categories of people mentioned by those praying:

- People born in Ross, and those new to Ross; all nationalities, colours and languages; refugees & migrants; people who are not here now.
- The young and old; those working or unemployed or retired. People of all abilities.
- Those who are parents and those with no children; people who are single, married, in partnerships, widowed;

- People irrespective of gender or sexuality.
- those of faith, other faiths, or no faith, and everyone in between.
- Those on the margins of society.
- The “poor in spirit” – those who are lonely, hurting, in abusive relationships, sick, trapped.

Let us note that not all of those people are currently in this church. Let us be honest and note that some of the types of people listed will be very difficult for some of us to welcome with a smile, and sit with in church. But if this is who we feel God is concerned about, then St Mary’s should be doing everything it can to offer a radically inclusive and warm welcome to anyone and everyone. It seems that our intergenerational focus and inclusivity are certainly being affirmed and encouraged.

We heard three other common themes emerging: That St Mary’s should be...

1. “A church where all can hear the good news”.

We feel that God is calling us to grow in our understanding of our own Christian faith, and to also grow in confidence in telling others why our faith is important to us.

2. “A church which cares about, and brings together, people of all sorts and needs.”

We heard that our practical care of people in need – irrespective of their age or background – is important. We celebrate the work of Toast, The Bereavement Cafe, and the Job Club and we are open to explore other ways of providing support.

3. “A church of healing love and loving courage...in the messy reality of life”

At the heart of the day was the light of God’s love, for each one of us, and for people of all ages and backgrounds. We feel that St Mary’s can shine with God’s love when we are together and wherever we are in daily life – inspiring healing in a divided country and hurting world.

As you hear these thoughts what do you glimpse of an emerging vision? What do these ideas say about the mission and identity of St Mary’s? What “still small voice” do you hear within? We would love to have your feedback. Please do email to vision@rawchurch.org.uk or drop off a note in the office.

In our gospel reading today there is the wonderful picture of Simeon taking up the infant Jesus in his arms and praising God. When we pick up a baby in our arms we cannot hold anything else... Today we begin to gather into our arms a vision of who we believe God is calling us to be and to do. And as this vision of the work of Christ becomes clearer and more definite, there will be need to set down anything else that we cannot hold simultaneously with this vision. When you pick up a baby in your arms you cannot hold anything else... We have asked God to speak to us. We are hearing something. Ways in which the light of God can shine ever more brightly through St Mary's. Let us pick up this vision and embrace it. Amen.