

THE PARISH CHARTER - VISION

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 13th June 2004

Nehemiah 2: 1-18, Ephesians 1: 15-23, Luke 4: 14-21

THEME: VISION

We seek to be a congregation which
Clearly identifies its ministry priorities and
Has a firm sense of its mission within our particular community

“Aim at nothing in particular... and you’ll be sure to achieve it!”

“Aim at nothing in particular... and you’ll aim at everything in general.”

So run two popular phrases, modern proverbs. They are in line with a more ancient-sounding proverb: “If the people have no vision, they perish”.

Far from being just modern mantras of the fashionable business world, invented by change-management gurus who may be able to charge huge fees to large companies, I believe these reflect the truth of our world as God has made it, and as God has made us: **People need a vision if they are to flourish.**

And, I suggest, people flourish especially when their vision is not just in broad keeping with human ideals, but when it is in harmony with God’s vision / intentions.

Vision may mean different things to different people; there are different types of vision.

1. Fantasy world / escapist – therefore out of touch with reality; hey, it could even be drug-induced!
2. The view of a dreamer / idealist – which may or may not come to fruition.
3. A solid, reality-based idea of what a person or community intends to do and to achieve, a clear idea of purpose and goals – and of the means to achieve them. Whilst this may be driven in part by dreams and ideals, it also takes account of realities and practicalities, so that the ideals do not remain wishy-washy dream-statements but, to use a popular phrase, are translated into reality.

I suggest this morning that the third option is a godly one, and is behind what is intended in this focus on Vision, the second in our 12-part series called “The Parish Charter”, following the emphasis last week on Leadership.

These days everybody seems to have a vision to articulate, since it became fashionable some decades ago. Everyone seems to have a Vision Statement – large corporations, civic organisations, and high-achieving individuals who have clearly

stated their goals and the means by which they intend to achieve them. Nowadays even churches and Christian organisations have mission statements – short phrases packed with substance that are intended to guide every decision and evaluate every action.

Some may be cynical towards “Vision / Mission Statements”. This cynicism perhaps stems from the reality of what has NOT been achieved – or that the statement is seen as only “words -to-impress”.

One typical example would be visions articulated by politicians with which either we disagree, or where we believe inadequate progress has been made in realising that vision.

Another would be that of a company loudly proclaiming that quality service and customer satisfaction is their top priority – even when the company’s employees fail to attend to your needs, dismiss your complaints and point to hidden clauses in the contract which seems to remove their liability towards you, the dissatisfied client! Hmmm – no wonder there may be some cynicism.

To highlight the summary statement for today, regarding Vision:

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I’d like to look at some pointers from today’s Scripture readings, and then to highlight some points on Vision that I hope we will take seriously ...

Nehemiah:

- From the period of the exile in Babylon, several centuries before Christ’s birth
- The exile had been prophesied before it occurred, and along with it, the destruction of Jerusalem – as punishment for complete disobedience to God over many generations
- The restoration of Israel after a period of exile had also been prophesied
- Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the King of Babylon (probably the greatest empire of the day).

A wonderful job – surely such a King did not drink “plonk” ... hopefully if this was your job you got to sample some great wines!

- Vision of rebuilding Jerusalem, lying in ruins
- God-inspired; See Chapter 1 for the ‘big picture’ – acknowledgement of why they went to Babylon and also of God’s promises and assurances
- Big vision (dream) – together with practicalities (permission under authority for the task, protection, provisions required)

- Kept parts of it to himself until it was pertinent to share with others in leadership, and only later shared with all the people what God had put in his heart
- But when that was done, the people were inspired and committed themselves to the common good. Being inspired together, they were able to overcome ridicule from some.

Not just “a lovely thing” to restore Jerusalem, to be able to sell pretty postcards of a renewed tourist destination. Rather it played a part in God’s overall plans – which included continuing to make known the salvation of God, and was to pave the way for the revelation of Jesus Christ and all that transpired there, which only took place some centuries after the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple.

Ephesians:

- St. Paul speaks powerfully about the power of God in Christ, raised from the dead
- Prays for the people that they may have wisdom and revelation (vision) as we come to know Christ, and
- That we may see with the eyes of the heart – that is the way we shall be enlightened – in other words, this is not purely an intellectual exercise but a spiritual process of seeing the realities of God at work in our world.

Luke:

- The start of Jesus’ ministry
- Filled with the Spirit
- He taught and did many spectacular things in public and many others in private or with small groups of people
- He had clarity of purpose (how did he come to that? – not just instantaneously but through lived experience and in relating to the Father)
- ...Yet he didn’t teach all, didn’t heal all.
- He knew he was sent, Spirit-anointed, to bring good news, proclaim release etc.

As his followers, we are to emulate Jesus

- Spirit-filled people, with
- A clarity of purpose (cannot do everything, nor on our own, nor in our own strength)
- We are Jesus’ hands and feet – “God in skin” to others
- How best are we to do that, here?

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What is our vision?

Recently asked that by another priest (Kevin Robertson) coming to preach here in a couple of weeks' time, and I had to say, "we don't have a clearly articulated one".

We have various aspects of vision:

- I operate out of a certain vision for the church, with certain priorities and emphases;
- We entered our Centenary Year with certain clear aims;
- This church has had certain priorities in years past and in the present, some of which have been achieved and others not (that's life!).

There are some "givens" in a church (including worship, prayer, teaching the faith, pastoring and caring, outreach) – but even there it can be useful to have some defining aims and intentions

But I believe articulating a clear vision is a need of ours, and therefore we need to do the following:

- Ask ourselves who we are? What kind of community are we now?
 - Past (vision of first parishioners here; the results as we know them)
 - Currently
- What changes are taking place now in our world, and in our region of PMB and the Umngeni-Midlands Region – and how are those going to affect us?
- What kind of congregation do we seek to be?
- In what ways do we need to be proactive, instead of waiting for the world to act upon us?

- For instance – increasingly secular world; rich-poor divide; participation much more by consensus than by imposition; growth of Hilton and PMB – large-scale developments (not only the approved and upmarket ones you've read about, but others even larger that architects and planners are currently working on whilst developers are buying up large pieces of land to develop– that's going to bring an influx of people; will they be young or retired, still predominantly white as Hilton still is, or changing the demographics and bringing a vibrant splash of colour?
- (Dick Andersen, Church Warden here in the early 1970's and parishioner of my former parish in JHB, on hearing I was coming to Hilton, told me I would love this charming little English village which possibly by now has municipal water [it was just being installed in about 1972] and has only one little grocery store at its centre next to the station which is no longer used! Even his picture of 30 years ago is one that we of Hilton now do not recognise, and perhaps laugh at. But what changes will we experience over the next 30 years?

- Decide on our priorities
- Can't be all things
- Can't do all things well

- Variety of emphases and needs to respond to – which are the ones WE will choose?
 - (Which are the ones God has given to us?)
 - Not only the nice cosy ones!
- Purpose-full as opposed to running around like a chicken with its head cut off!

Danger for clergy: ‘service industry’ – wear yourself out pleasing everybody for today but not ensuring the long-term growth and vibrancy of the community, and its continuation into the community.

This is also a danger for congregations. Example: Our Centenary year – aims included social, fun and togetherness, thankfulness to God in celebrations, and fund-raising – but we could not take on every idea otherwise would have exhausted ourselves in busy-ness which may in the end have achieved little)

I am certain that we want to be a people of vision, clearly understanding who we are, what kind of church we want to be, and taking steps to ensure we become those things. This implies change and adaptation as we go along and sense a change in priorities. I am sure we do not seek to bury ourselves away totally – out of keeping with the character of Jesus whom we follow, who willingly left behind his position of glory with the Father and came to fulfil God’s purposes on earth. I am sure we want neither to live as though we are in a fantasy world, nor as people who only are dreamers and idealists but have no practical good.

I am sure that instead

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We have some work to achieve that, and will have some work to do in order to maintain that. It is the work of the congregation – as expressed also in its leaders, but with a consensus and the combined wisdom and prayerful input of its people. Ongoing.

- Questionnaire at the end of the Parish Charter, specially designed to help a parish evaluate its levels of healthiness
- Further discussion in the groups meeting in the week (in some house churches, and the one on Wednesday nights meeting here in our hall)

Vision does not necessarily imply bigness (of size of congregation / buildings / bank balance)

Tension: Inwardly focussed vs. outwardly focussed

- Irony: congregations focussed only inwards often simply die out
 - Not God’s intention for the church to be a holy huddle of the self-satisfied

- Yet those focussed outwards only can neglect important internal issues
- The divine initiative: Outward, yet drawing in to receive nourishment and strength, to be inspired to faithfully live our roles in the Kingdom of God

What kind of community are we?

What kind of church do we want to be?

What needs to change in order to change the present reality?

What is good and godly that needs to be affirmed and strengthened?

Where are we weak, or even failing, in the mission that God has given us – and how do we alter that?

In what ways can we increase our impact for God – widen our circle of godly influence?