

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

+ Trinity 1                  June 26<sup>th</sup> 2011

### What's the vision?

I'm going to pray a bit later on in this sermon, not now – and I hope it will be clear why...

Two weeks ago, at Pentecost, I preached a sermon about the church 'going for growth', and several of you were kind enough to respond very positively to it, letting me know that you'd found it inspiring; I take it that means that you want to be part of the vision of seeing this church grow, not just in depth and holiness, but also in numbers.

Today, as many of you know, you're all invited to take part in a Mission Action Planning meeting after coffee in the church hall, and I hope as many as possible of you will come across and stay for that meeting. I think the vision for growth should inform our thinking as we do that exercise together. It should be a lens through which we look at the five marks of mission we've been considering in

the groups which have come up with suggestions for the next three years.

The ideas which will be set before you on sheets of paper round the Hall for your comment are, many of them, quite specific about things we might do, or do differently; you'll want to respond to them with practical questions in mind as to whether we could fulfill these suggestions, who would take responsibility for carrying them out, whether they're really appropriate for this church, here, now, and for the next three years, and how they'd fit in with the life we already lead - the things we already do which we believe are important.

But as well as the practical concerns, let's also remember the vision for growth – both in numbers, and in spiritual depth. So now, to get our minds focused that way, I want *you* to do a little bit of work, here and now, in church, to prepare for the meeting after coffee.

The sidesemen are going to come round to you now with some sheets like this [show sheet], and pens and pencils. I'd like you to share the sheets amongst two or three of you. If you're a newcomer

or a visitor to our church, I'd really like you to find someone near you who is a longer-term member (or perhaps, I should say, *they* should find you); I'm going to make some observations and ask some questions about the life of this church, here at St Mark's, and then ask you to do some reflecting in your two's and three's both about where we are now, and what God's vision might be for this church in three years time. The people who are new or visiting will be very helpful to us, because old-hands in the congregation will need to share with you how they see St Mark's, in order for you to answer the questions together; and sometimes explaining a community to someone who's a relative outsider can be one of the best ways of getting perspective on it. And also, if you come from a church elsewhere, you may have insights and observations to make about church life as *you* know it which could be very penetrating. So, I do hope everyone will take part, and that you'll move about out of your seats if you need to, to team up appropriately...

I should say before I ask you to do this exercise, I hope you'll let us collect your sheets of paper with whatever you've written on them afterwards –

someone will come round with a basket for them at the time of the collection, and they'll be put on the altar. And later, when the Ministry Forum and The PCC takes forward what happens at our meeting later this morning, the insights you come up with now will also be taken into account.

Before we start, let's do what we should always do when something important's in hand - ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

*O God, who at Pentecost taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in this, and in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Now, if you'll look at your sheets together, you'll see a picture of a box of twelve eggs, and four baskets. We all know the phrase, 'don't put all your eggs in one basket', so that's the underlying metaphor. Each basket is labelled with a word – Proclamation, Persuasion, Presence, and Prayer. These are the four things which are necessary if a church is to grow.

And the first question I want you to consider, is how many of our 'eggs' we're currently putting into each basket at St Mark's in terms of effort or focus. (This is where longer term church members may find that having a visitor or relative newcomer with them is helpful, because it will challenge you to articulate some truths about St Mark's, to yourself as well as them.) If we start with Prayer – then we have the most fundamental thing. If the church is to grow, in any and every sense, we need to pray for it – and keep praying. Obviously, we do pray at St Mark's – quite a lot; and probably in our own daily lives, too? But do we pray for *growth* – the growth the life of this Christian community?

Moving across the page we come to the word Presence; and this is about the links we have with our local community; obviously, all of us have many individual links with people, and that's part of the story – the networks we naturally have can all be used by God to touch people's lives, if we want them to be. (And, by the way, did you know that in Great Britain as a whole, although practising Christians may seem to be a small minority, it's reckoned that at least 90% of the population knows at least one practising Christian. My guess

is that in Cambridge that proportion is even higher. So we have tremendous presence at the individual level – if we choose to think about our natural networks intentionally, as the context where we've been set to live out God's mission.)

But there's another aspect to Presence – and that's to think about the natural sub-communities that surround us geographically – the school, the pub, the social club, the colleges, the various clubs and societies, the different age and interest groups. Is there someone from St Mark's actively involved in all of them?

And, thinking about Presence, we need also to think to think about the church as a corporate presence – something says to the community 'here we are, we can make a difference.' As our Mission Statement, written some years ago has it, our aim is 'to be the people of God in this place, and to work to make God real for our community'. How effectively are we doing that in those networks in which people live so much of their lives around us?

When we move up to the basket labelled Proclamation, we'll be asking ourselves questions

about how much we manage effectively to take the Christian story, and some sort of witness about the effect it can have on people's lives, into the public sphere. Sometimes we do this by bringing people into the church building, for plays, films, etc. But are we doing much proclamation outside the church building, and is what we do inside as effective as it might be in touching the whole community?

Finally, we come to the basket labelled Persuasion – and that's about taking conversations which may arise out of proclamation further : it's obviously not about brain-washing, or shoving religion down people's throats. But it *is* about us giving an account of the hope that is in us in a reasonable and respectful way, whether through structured discussion and nurture sessions organised by the church, or within conversations we have in other contexts.

So, for a few minutes I'd like you to consider in your pair or threesome how the 'twelve eggs' of St Mark's life are currently distributed. And then write down a number beside each basket, with the date '2011' written beside it.....

Next, I'd like you to talk together about how you'd answer the question 'How do we think *God* might want us to be distributing those same eggs of effort in three years time? Is the balance we've got now one which needs adjusting at all?' You can express your joint answer to that question by writing the number of eggs which you believe should be in each basket by 2014 beside it, just as you wrote the number you think expresses our current reality...

Finally, if you're feeling bold, you might like to venture a sentence on the back of the sheet of paper which says what you think God would like us to aim for in the next three years; it might be a numerical statement, such as 'We believe God would like St Mark's to grow by at least 5% per year by 2014' or some other kind of statement – 'We believe God would like St Mark's to start reaching teenagers , or some other kind of social group by 2014'; or it might be a statement about us, and the kind of Christians God might want us to be growing into over the next three years - more prayerful, more confident in expressing our faith, more involved in particular aspects of our

community – or whatever. Don't worry if you can't come up with a statement – just give it a little bit of thought now, and if you do manage to write something down, that's good – and if not, that's good, too....

Well, thank you for taking the time and effort to do this. We've spent longer on it than we usually do on a sermon, so, for once, I suggest we move straight on to our intercessions, and omit the Creed...