

Sermon for Sunday 19th July 2015

'What is *our* Vision? Given by Revd. Sarah Shaw

I was looking through our photos from our holiday on Arran and the Cowal Peninsula yesterday. Most of them are pretty dull. Many are of rocks, insects and flowers... you had to be there! But there were also churches. So many I couldn't name them all. A few ruined chapels among them, but most not - many thriving. Some fairly new – for example, St Margaret of Scotland on Arran, which has only been in existence as an Episcopal church since 1995. Prior to that the congregation worshipped in a private house.

Every church had a fascinating history, often beginning with somebody who had had a vision. I don't mean necessarily a direct vision from God; although some would claim that, but with some sort of vision that this was going to be a place for a worshipping community to encounter God. A place, too, where others would also be drawn to encounter God, and his reconciling love. And it's not really to do with the building – although at some point someone decided that that would be a good idea. Church communities, church families at their best begin with someone having a vision, and inspiring a group with others to help build that vision.

In our Old Testament reading we heard Jeremiah (the messenger from God), and in our Epistle, Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) proclaiming glorious visions of the Kingdom of God. From Jeremiah, that God himself will gather his flock from all corners of the earth, will bring the lost back home, where they shall be fruitful. Not one will be missing, it is promised, and they shall not fear any longer. Justice and righteousness will be executed in those days. And from Paul, the vision that we have been called by God into one new humanity reconciled in Christ. Not separated by laws and rules, but united in one Spirit. As a holy Temple, nothing less than the dwelling place of God. All good stuff. It gives us hope that all that we see now, particularly all human experience that involves suffering, will not be the end of the story. In eternity there will be completion, there will be reconciliation – and no-one will be lost. But is that it? Do we need to do anything then, if God has it all sown up?

In Ecclesiastes 3 the preacher writes that God has put eternity into our hearts. I believe that eternity is now, not a future dream. It is what happens when people have visions, dream dreams, build churches. It has already begun, and where people have a vision anything can become possible with God. We're not just Christians who are living and working in this part of Edinburgh in 2015, who belong to St Cuthbert's Colinton. What we do and say in our lifetime, what we give priority to – both as individuals and as a church – have an impact on eternity. There are repercussions beyond our earthly lives. I think that's why the lives of saints and martyrs can and do inspire us. Their story is not just in the past, it has impact on the present and the future, and we are part of the same story. Eternity belongs to God's time rather than our time.

Part of this same eternity is the stuff that we read and hear of in the news that can make us cry, or possibly indifferent. In March 2015, according to the Scottish Government, there were 3,300 dispersed asylum seekers in Scotland. Because of the rules, none of them can work. Many are not free to come and go as they please, and live a life in the shadows which may stretch on for many years. It's hard to square this with Jeremiah's prophecy, isn't it - that all will be brought home, not one will be lost, that they will fear no longer. Because of the situation in the Middle East, this situation can probably only get worse. In April 2015 the Herald newspaper reported that the number of people in the UK using foodbanks had exceeded 1, 000, 000, of which a disproportionate number are in Scotland – around 100,000. And this month this Institute for Fiscal Studies, an independent research body, predicted that low-paid workers will be worse off now because the cuts to tax credits and other benefits outweighs the boost provided by the new national living wage.

These issues can seem beyond us. But I believe that God *has* put eternity into our hearts, and therefore a sense of being part of a much bigger plan or purpose than we can conceive. So what is *our* vision, for our church in this place? How will we as individuals, as a church family, impact nothing less than eternity in seeking to have influence where we can. To set wrongs right and to reach out to the vulnerable – the hungry, the displaced, the poor?

Firstly, I think we need to recognise that following Jesus demands everything from us - that all of our lives, our resources, are available for his service. I don't know about you, but I find that really tough. In the Gospel reading today, we're told that the apostles gathered around Jesus, telling him of the things they'd taught and done. He encourages them to come away for a rest, but that's scuppered by many more people coming to them. Following Jesus demands everything from us. When we're tired and we've had enough, we may be called on to do much more.

Secondly, Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd. This is an image often used in the Old Testament to describe people who are being misused or divided by a corrupt and exploitative King, prophet or priest, indeed it was included in our Jeremiah reading today.. How many in our society, even here in this community of South Edinburgh are vulnerable to being misused, abused, treated unfairly, or set against each other, by those in power? What part is God asking *us* to play in releasing them from fear, from violence and from being violated, and in reconciling people to each other?

In the Jeremiah reading we heard that God would raise up shepherds for those who are scattered, lost, mistreated, vulnerable, and poor, and that through them God's people will fear no longer. This is a role for all of us who seek to follow Christ. And I think we should aim high, because this is about eternity. Everything we do or say, every decision we make, has the potential to bring God's Kingdom closer or push it away. Let's look forward to the coming months as we seek to develop our vision for this church family and seek to find ways of being good shepherd to people in South Edinburgh and beyond.