

Vision Launch Address

Rod Paterson

Our vision for West Cheltenham:
**Communities and
places buzzing with
the extraordinary
presence of Jesus.**

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OUR VISION FOR WEST CHELTENHAM

Communities and places buzzing with the extraordinary presence of Jesus.

We believe this vision statement speaks powerfully to us now. But we also believe it will turn out to be prophetic in ways in which we cannot yet see or understand.

Over the next three weeks or so, in each of our churches, we are going to begin to explore this vision. Here is a first take:

At the heart of this vision we believe that God wants us to encounter and share **the extraordinary presence of Jesus**. In this season of Easter we remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). When all seemed lost, Jesus had come alongside, but they hadn't recognised him.

"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him" - the extraordinary presence of Jesus.

In the next sentence we read:

'Our hearts were burning' – that's **buzzing!** (Where else in scripture do we see people buzzing after an encounter with Jesus?)

"They asked each other, 'were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?'"

After their encounter with Jesus, their hearts were set on fire, the two disciples were compelled to go to their **communities and places** (in this case back to Jerusalem) to share what had happened to them.

We need to take action. Where will we find the money? Or how else?

We will till the soil, sow the seed, and nurture the growth

But the seed I am most interested in...

Is the seed that is being planted in your heart, in your mind, perhaps even right now, perhaps as you leave this place, perhaps over the next weeks and months and years. The seed that causes your heart to burn. That sets you buzzing. That sends you out to your communities and places. This is ultimately how the vision will be realised!

These are some seeds. We will prayerfully prepare the ground, and prayerfully sow these and other seeds, but it is only God who will bring forth the growth.

Let us pray...

Centre has been identified as a possibly venue. I wonder if this might lead to a whole new youth and community mission opportunity?

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The Resolve Course

The creators of this course (The Ugly Duckling Company) have produced other really good material. At Spring Harvest I came across their stand in the resource tent and spoke with one of the co-creators of the material who lives in the Forest of Dean. She mentioned that they also produce something called the 'Happiness Lab'. Also they are looking for secondary schools to trial a youth version. I spoke to Matt Pinless at All Saints Academy just last week and this looks like it might happen then.

I wonder if we could run a whole year round 'Life programme' (body, mind and spirit) that would connect with the real lives of many in our parish?

We will till the soil, sow the seed, and nurture the growth.

Connecting other Christians

What would it look like to connect together with all the Christians who are in any way connected with our parish? From other denominations, from other churches? We are all sent out. What if we get a lot better in connecting as we are 'sent out'. I have spent time with Christians from Hesters Way Baptist, Trinity, Cambray Baptist, C3, God First, St Mark Methodist, St Thomas More. Connecting and praying together.

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Our Buildings

One has been knocked down and the other two are barely fit for purpose.

"They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those staying with them, assembled together and saying 'It is true! The Lord has risen and appeared to Simon.' Then the two told what had happened on the way..."

I'm going to suggest there are three areas of outworking of our vision:

1. PRAYER

Prayer is the oxygen of our faith. It is the heartbeat of our journey with Jesus. Prayer brings us into the presence of God. Real prayer. Honest prayer. We come before him and we find we are known by him. Jesus taught the disciples to pray 'Our Father in heaven'. Come before your Father who is in heaven, into the presence of the living God. And when you are in his presence, pray that the will of God should be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer is the gateway to presence.

The size of the task before us is so big, and so far beyond our previous failed strategies, that I truly believe we need a new movement of the Spirit based upon a determination to listen to God.

Now I suspect if I was to ask most people here and across our parish how their prayer life was going, they would look at me and say 'well it could be better!' If I were to ask you to score your prayer life on a scale of 0 to 10, I wonder how you would score it?

Would you like to pray better?

So here's our first commitment, because I think it reflects what we all recognise as a priority: to learn to pray better.

We will begin on Ascension Day and join the Archbishops call to prayer, 'thy kingdom come' from Ascension day to Pentecost. We will put ourselves in the place of the first disciples who said to Jesus, 'Lord teach us to pray'. We will take it from there. And if we get excited by prayer....

Our new parish warden suggested to me not long after I arrived that it would be great to have 24 or 48 hours of prayer. I think a continuous 24 hours is doable. I suspect 48 hours would be a stretch, especially through the hours of the night. We would need a prayer room that is accessible and safe. Where might that be.... would you pray and think about that?

But I really believe God is calling us to a week of 24/7 prayer as a way of learning to pray. As a people who **really** want to learn to pray. And who knows after that, if prayer is central to our vision, then what would it mean to be a permanently praying community?

2. DISCIPLESHIP

The impact of encountering Jesus changes people's lives. We cannot encounter Jesus and remain the same.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus said, "*were not our hearts burning*" (Buzzing!). The consequence was that they immediately turned round and went back to Jerusalem. Would you like to feel that buzz and a similar sense of purpose?

What I really like about the words "communities and places" is that they send us out. To claim the ground. Each of us living on our frontlines. As pioneers. Recognising that we are involved in a spiritual battle. This is whole life discipleship.

As we come before Jesus he transforms us and our way of looking at the world. He opens our eyes to what is in front of us, right where we are, where we are already involved. We already have so many contacts, particularly as a parish through Family Space.

The prayer for His kingdom to come and His will to be done then becomes our moment by moment responsibility. It's a privilege, it's an excitement, it's a challenge and an adventure; to pray and become involved in bringing His kingdom into being.

I just don't think we are confident or equipped. So here's a second commitment: To explore new ways of equipping us for such a life. New tools. A new language to speak to a largely secular society.

Before I get to the third area let me tell you something of what happened to me last week.



This is what I believe God said to me: "till the soil, sow the seed, nurture the growth..... But the harvest is mine. I send the rain and the sun."

3. SOWING SEEDS

If prayer and discipleship are "tilling the soil", the foundations of our vision, then there are some opportunities that are opening up to us. Here are some seeds:

Wellspring

The diocesan project to turn underused sports facilities into centres for Christian witness and mission. Engaging with young people. The Oasis