

Pray. "I have a dream!" The famous words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, the American Baptist preacher and civil rights activist assassinated as a dangerous radical. As we come to stewardship Sunday, I, too, have a dream; I hope you won't shoot me for it!

My dream is that we, as a Christian community, can make a significant difference to those whom God has placed us amongst, by sharing the real and positive hope our faith brings us. We all meet people looking for 'something beyond themselves' to give meaning and direction to their lives; they want hope when in dark times. For our church to meet this urgent need we must understand what our faith in Jesus really gives us; how utterly, radically different it is to anything else this world or even other faiths can offer.

Yesterday we had a meeting with PCC members to talk about this very thing; how we can grow in our own faith and share it with others. It was a really good time that moved us forward in our desire to grow, and we agreed to use some material next year called Leading Your Church Into Growth to help us all think this through.

We believe this material will build on what God's already calling us to do through our three mission priorities of children & families' work, pastoral care and communications. You can read a little about those in our stewardship leaflet which, if you're on the electoral roll, you'll already have had. If you haven't then I hope you collected one from the sides-people as you came in.

But what's all this talk of mission and growth got to do with stewardship? To quote Bishop Christopher at the last Diocesan Synod: "Our goal is not to make a financial profit. Our goal is transformation. Transformation of hearts, of individuals, of community, of society, of the world." This is what God calls us all to, as a church and as individuals because he made us stewards of his creation; this is the primary meaning of stewardship in the Bible.

However you read them, the opening chapters of Genesis set the agenda for the whole bible. They're not a factual, scientific text book, but describe the story of God's very first interactions with his creation. It's abundantly clear that, however it happened, God is the originator of everything. Creation was his to bring into being, and his to dispose of, as he saw fit.

Genesis 2 tells us that he saw fit to dispose of it by creating a steward to tend his creation - mankind. His direction to us is to care for creation, to work in it, to make it fruitful. God's purpose is ALWAYS that we should be fruitful, and that our labour should cause growth and increase. Genesis 2 says this is the first call of God upon mankind, the real meaning of stewardship.

So the first reason to talk about stewardship is that it's God's call on our lives; giving of ourselves for a cause greater than ourselves is what we're created for. When we're selfish, keeping stuff for ourselves, we deny what we're made to be and we become distorted somehow; selfishness turns us inward, away from our God-given calling to be outward-looking stewards of his creation. After all, a steward's job is to consider first and foremost his master's well-being and affairs; a steward can only consider his own needs after those of his master have been met. So, as we learn to give of ourselves more and more, we actually become more of what we're meant to be; we become more fulfilled, not less. Ask any good parent, spouse or partner. You gain your greatest fulfilment by giving of yourself to see others grow.

So if stewardship is our calling, what's our response? Our gospel gives a clue. Interestingly Matthew makes it the last parable Jesus told before his triumphal Palm Sunday entry to Jerusalem. Yet it comes immediately after the story Bob preached on two weeks ago, where a rich young ruler approached Jesus asking about what was needed to inherit eternal life and enter the kingdom of God. We do well to note such narrative arrangements; they tell us more than just the story alone.

The rich young ruler learned he couldn't DO anything to earn his place in God's kingdom; renouncing things that kept him from God and following Jesus was what mattered. Yet the people who did follow Jesus on Palm Sunday thought they were about to take part in the glorious overthrow of the Roman Empire as this Messiah ushered in their idea of the Kingdom of God; following him would earn their place in it. Neither was right.

The truth is in the parable. This vineyard story is one of God's utter generosity towards us. It's God's generosity that keeps inviting new workers into his vineyard for a full day's pay; it's God's free invitation that gives us all access to his kingdom, regardless of 'how far the day has gone'. His call is always to come and help make his vineyard fruitful. How wonderful to be part of that! And do you see parallels with Genesis here? Also, literally at the end of the day, God doesn't reward people according to what everyone else thinks is right, he pours out on all us workers, equally, his generosity and justice.

But how is this generosity just? Think! A denarius was the standard daily wage, supplying all folk needed to live. This picture shows how, as we tend his vineyard, God will provide all of us with our needs for daily living, and God's inestimable generosity will provide the same for others. In other words, God's provision for all the workers was - life.

You could stretch the analogy a little further and say the denarius is a picture of what we all need for true, eternal life. Our Christian faith says this is the free gift of a restored relationship with God through Jesus' Good Friday sacrifice, and assurance of eternal life through Jesus' Easter Day resurrection; that's true generosity!

I asked what should be our response to God's call for us to be stewards of his creation. We could respond by parsimonious grumbling, like the ungrateful workers, or we could turn away sadly like the rich young ruler, or we could reject Jesus because he doesn't fulfil our self-centred desires, like those who followed him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and turned on him 5 days later.

Alternatively we could respond to the generosity of God by joining the workforce in the vineyard with a cheerful heart and soul, being happy that the Lord of the vineyard will reward us for our stewardship and sacrifice, even if it means we have to work through the heat of the day. And we can be happy that he will reward others according to his inestimable generosity towards them too, regardless of how long they appear to work.

God placed Adam and Eve in beautiful Eden. He's placed us in beautiful St Mary's. God, in the parable, called the workers to make the vineyard fruitful. He calls us all to do the same work here in Warsash, and many are faithfully doing much already!

But there's a bigger dream to grow, there's a dream of transformation to bring to reality, as our Bishop has said. One of the reasons the American civil rights movement succeeded is that people believed it really could transform society; I believe we can transform ours too. Otherwise why has God put us all here? He wants us all, his church here, to be fruitful, to convey the message of his incredible generosity; we're all involved in it, just by being here, and we have a message that can truly transform our community.

Our stewardship leaflet is designed to tell you a little about where our dreams have brought us. We want those dreams to take us further. God has provided financially for St Mary's in the past, and he'll surely continue to do so as we make working in his vineyard our priority. Yet we must all play our part in that provision; it can't be left to anonymous donors to close the gap in our finances year on year. We wouldn't possibly plan our own home's finances like that!

The leaflet gives the facts about our finances. By far and away the biggest income we have is from our own giving. The largest item of expenditure is our parish share, which gives parishes their vicars with housing and pensions, the diocesan staff providing expertise to support all our church schools and help

with publicity, legal issues, training, safeguarding, finances and so much more. It's good value for money. However, from next year we'll have to pick up the increased cost of Alex's extra hours, which we feel are key to our missional outreach. It's an area of our own vineyard that is starting to show interesting early fruit!

We wrote the leaflet, not to induce guilt but to spell out the facts of where we are. We commend it to you, but if you have any questions about the information in it, then please talk to us. Please use it to pray and think about your response to being a steward in God's vineyard. If your circumstances have changed and you feel you need to decrease your giving, then you should. If you feel God is calling you to give more, then please do.

Above all remember we're all called to be stewards of God's vineyard, to work for it to bear fruit, and to share the generosity of God with those around us. To return to where I started, I have a dream, a dream of a growing church, a church working for growth and transformation in this vineyard of Warsash, where God has placed us. After all, if we don't want to be a growing church, a transforming church, what kind of church are we? AMEN.