

AGM 2015 Vicars Address

Hebrews 10:19-25 A Call to Persevere in Faith

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

It is not possible after just three weeks of active ministry as vicar of Meadgate to review the year in a meaningful way. Except for 18 days following the last AGM and 31 days preceding this one Meadgate Church has been in vacancy. And many people have contributed to the continuation and development of ministry here. I don't know who everyone is to thank them properly. But I suspect special thanks must go to Chris Smith, and to Ros Coleridge, for their ministry as churchwardens, with the additional responsibilities that a vacancy brings aside from the recruiting of people and the establishment of a new worship centre. But as I thank them I know that I am also giving thanks through them to everyone who has played a part in all that is happening. I want to thank you all too for the welcome you have given us and for the nice things you have said about the little bits we have done in our short time here. I hope we will be able to welcome you all at our house tomorrow for an afternoon of tea and cake and bouncy castles.

It's not easy either, with being here just this short time to say what the coming year will bring. With the few people I have met I have tried listen to how people are feeling and what their hopes for the church are. On the other hand first impressions are often helpful things and maybe I can voice some things that others, who have been more involved, might find more difficult to say.

The text from Hebrews 10:19-20 might help us plot a course. And to make it easy I'll use three words beginning with the letter 'I'. Or to put it in terms of a well known television programme, This address is brought to you by the letter 'I'.

An Intentional Church

Firstly it is my hope that Meadgate Church knows itself to be, and is known as, an Intentional Church. The Hebrews writer says ²³ *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.* ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.* **Unswerving, Consider,** These are words which call us to an application of mind and will to what we are about. The issue that the writer was addressing was that there were Jewish people, (the Hebrews), who had set out on a new venture. And that new venture was Christianity. They saw in Jesus the fulfilment of all their hopes and dreams. The completion of everything that their Jewish religion had longed and hoped for. And they had gone for it. They had become Christians. But now they faced opposition from both the Roman empire, because Christianity wouldn't bow down to Caesar as Lord, and it faced opposition from the Jewish community, they were put out of the synagogues and families because of their offensive claim for Jesus. So there was persecution, and the Jewish Christians were wanting to turn back. They were tempted to give up on the insecurities of living by faith in Jesus and go back to the sureties of the old sacrificing system in the temple.

Well the brothers and sisters of Meadgate Church, you will know better than I the cost and anxieties of setting out on a new venture. Will the hopes of daring to dream be borne out in the future? The writer talks of the one who has **promised**. He is **faithful**. And if Meadgate church's new venture is founded on the promise that was discerned before the AGM last year then we must pursue that promise unswervingly. Because it is the Lord who has promised and he is faithful. Now that means that we have to be intentional about being church. Deciding to follow the promise.

Now the issue and the great cultural challenge for the Hebrews was the call to leave the old Jewish faith which was centred on ethnic belonging and especially a belonging to one's own blood family, to belonging first and foremost to the new Christian community made up of people from any racial or social background. A people who are bound together not by family blood but by the blood of Jesus. A people whose first identity is no longer in their blood family but in him, who by his blood has purchased men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And that is no less a cultural challenge to us. To say that I belong more to my church family than to the blood family into which I was born. But I do. You who are in Christ are my mother, my father, my sister and my brother, my daughter and my son. And to meet that cultural change calls for a change of intention. My first priority to be Body of Christ. My true and eternal Family. Now one of the things I detect about the new venture of the Orchards is the effect it has had on other things Meadgate Church has been doing. The groups whose reports go into this Annual report and is the true review of the last year are vital and important ministries. And they are what we are building on in terms of the development of ministry here. And yet I sense that there is some anxiety that at this time those ministries are under resourced. Struggling a bit to have enough helpers and group leaders and resources. They have unanswered questions. Are we staying here? Are we going over there? Are we going to carry on with worship in the parade?

So there is a specific challenge about being an intentional church which I want to bring to each person. And that is that apart from coming to worship on a Sunday or Wednesday what else do you intentionally bring to the life of Meadgate Church? In pursuing the promise are you considering how you are spurred on and spurring others on to love and good deeds in our church? Please seek God about the part you have to play and be intentional about it.

An inspirational church

Secondly it is my hope that Meadgate church will continue to be known as an Inspirational church. *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.* It is a truth that without the inspiration of God in us we can't do anything. All our doings are nothing worth without him. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of **Confidence, full assurance**. These are things we can't work up for ourselves. These are things which come from spending time in the presence of God. Together offering him our praise, together seeking his help in times of trouble, and together discerning his guiding Spirit among showing us the way forward. The word inspire means 'to breathe into' we need God to breathe into us his life and his love and his wisdom.

And if there is one thing that can most definitely be said of Meadgate church is that it is inspired. It is bold, confident and forward looking, It is inspirational both in the sense of seeking the inspiration of God and also of inspiring people outside the church. The lord is adding to the number, people are coming to faith and being healed and turning from sin. It's happening all around us. They said to me at interview what will you bring to Meadgate church and I said I'll bring a willing spirit to be inspired. To learn from what goes on here. To understand how god is doing his thing in the church. Because I don't know how to do church in the way Meadgate Church does it.....Yet....

Now how do we discern the inspiring breath of God? The writer to the Hebrews was contending with the fact that the people were wanting to Go back to the dead works of religion. Sacrificing in the temple. So he tells them that the gospel is **a living way**. More than worship on a Sunday, more than praying at home, which can so easily become our religious duty, we need place God at the heart of our meeting together. By talking, listening, praying, and agreeing. (That's actually what the DCC is for and does.) One of the things that the new venture of the orchards has done has been to raise questions in people's minds. I think we grasped the vision. But people are asking me what's the plan? What is the priority? What needs to be done? And who is going to do it?

None of these are bad questions. And it is not bad that they are being asked. They come naturally out of the process of change which we are going through. We should rejoice that they are there to be answered. As it happens the archdeacons are asking all the churches similar questions in a paper called 'Serving with accountability'. They want churches to consider similar questions about their mission and ministry contexts and to give some kind of report back. It seems to me that these two things combine. We can address our own questions and those of the Archdeacons at the same time. Indeed the DCC last time agreed there should be a day in which we meet to discuss the questions asked in 'serving with accountability'. So I have called a Church day on the 27th June. It's a Saturday. All day. Not a morning or an afternoon but a whole day to talk about our purpose, our priorities, and our plan. A forum where we can bring the questions people are asking me, where we can seek the inspiring breath of God and where we and the Holy Spirit can decide what the next year or two at least is going to look like.

You see last year's momentous AGM was inspired to follow the one who promised. And we may think we have done the hard thing in securing the orchards for worship. But I think maybe now we face the harder thing. To make it work. To fulfil the vision that is set before us. To really go for it so that in two and a half years time the Orchards is so central to the community that there can be no possibility of having to give it back. But it will only happen if we are inspired. And inspiration church in our service of the God who promised and is faithful.

An invitational Church

Thirdly I hope that Meadgate Church will continue to be known as an **Invitational Church**²⁵ *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Being a Christian has many challenges. But one of the things I want to stop the church doing, and this comes especially from good evangelical preachers like me, is saying to the people 'go out there and share your faith with someone else.' There are some people, like me as it happen, who find that kind of thing easy. It just comes naturally as we do it all over the place. But I know that for lots, perhaps most, it is a difficult and paralyzing thing to hear. So I promise you I will not ask you to do it...Ever.

But I would ask you – and I think this is more biblical anyway. To be invitational. In the way that people ask you to come to dinner, or to go to a show, or to come to a quiz night in the local social club. We can all do that. But we will only do it if we can overcome our fear of people saying 'No'. 'Will you come with me?', 'No' they say. And we think we are responsible. But we are not. They are. If we invite them it's an invitation and they can say 'No' or 'Yes', it's up to them. If a hundred people left our church on a Sunday and in the week asked a hundred other people to come with them the next, we wouldn't get another hundred people in the church. But someone would come. And of those who come, some will stay. We just need to be able to say in some way, 'will you come with me?' and leave the answer to them. *Encouraging one another* says the writer to the Hebrews, encouraging one another to meet together. So as an opportunity and encouragement I let you know that our Bishop Steven is having a Bishops court breakfast on **Saturday 20th June 8.30am – 10.30am** where he will speak evangelistically for 15 minutes about the Christian faith for 15 minutes and then take questions from the floor. And it's free. Free breakfast for you and a friend who you can ask to come. With no obligation to say yes or even become a Christian. See me for more details. Why not think about who you could ask. Be invitational. Because I bet someone invited you once.

An Intentional Church, an Inspirational Church, an Invitational Church, may our coming year look like that.