

So, as I mentioned earlier,  
the sermon slot today is being given over to the Vicar's Report.  
The vicar's report is not one of the formally required reports of the annual church meeting.  
It's more of an opportunity for us to reflect together  
on what God has been doing at OPC over the last year  
and to paint a broad vision for the next year and beyond.  
So, I won't be getting into the weeds, as it were, of church  
at least not too much,  
as that's the role of all the other reports at the annual meeting later on.

And I want to start with acknowledging that two years ago  
I felt that God was highlighting  
the little story of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary's house  
as a key focus for us as a community.  
It's a very immediate, very homely, and yet also a very heavenly image,  
all at the same time.

And I want to say that this image remains important for me,  
as I seek lead to this church  
that aspires to be a place for everyone with Christ at the centre.

Christ was at the centre of things for Mary;

Christ was important to Martha,

but he was not at the centre.

She was dutifully engrossed in all the necessary tasks  
that she felt must be done to welcome the Lord properly,  
but her efforts were not flowing from a heart centred on Jesus.

Which we can see from her frustration,

and having a moan to Jesus  
and asking him to tell Mary to help out.

Yes, in church life there are many activities,  
but – and this is not just a hot topic right now,  
this is a life-long reference point –  
but we are not working **for** Jesus,  
with are working **with** Jesus,  
alongside him,  
in partnership with him.

All our work, whether in church, or outside church,  
whether paid or voluntary  
– you might be a carer, a bus driver, a teacher or a surgeon,  
all of our work as Christians is meant to flow from a surrendered heart,  
a heart that is constantly sitting at Jesus' feet,  
eyes fixed on him,  
drinking in his every word.

Being comes before doing.

And truthfully, God doesn't need any of our doing.

He doesn't.

He can achieve his purposes without any of us.

He's always and primarily interested in the connection we have with him.

All of what we **do** must flow from who we **are** in him,  
and who we are is beloved.

You are, I am, his beloved child.

He's not an add on to our lives,

he is our life,  
and he came so that we might live through him.

When this fundamental state of rest, and belovedness,  
is the state of our hearts,  
with every increasing consistency,  
Christ will be at the centre of our lives,  
and at the centre of our church life.

One year ago I suggested that our ministry would begin to shift  
from a focus on serving people,  
to a focus on serving God.

Our Ezekiel reading really gives us a wonderful image to reflect on,  
as we think about church life  
what it's origin and power source is.

A key verse to remember, of course, with all that do in church  
is: "Unless the Lord builds the house,  
the builders labour in vain."

From Psalm 127

And it's the difference, really,  
between working for God, like Martha,  
and working with God, like Mary,  
from a heart overflowing with his love for us.

And the image Ezekiel gives us is that of the ancient Jewish temple.

Although Ezekiel is not writing from Jerusalem

where the Temple had been;  
he was writing from exile,  
and the temple had been destroyed already.  
But in the vision he sees the temple as the source of fresh water,  
that flows out first in a trickle,  
and which across its length grows into a mighty river  
that not only brings abundant life to the land around it,  
but which at the end of its course,  
turns the bitter, salty water of the sea fresh.

Now, the temple is perhaps the key image in all of scripture.

Because it does not just stand for the ancient temple of Jerusalem,  
not at all.

In fact, the ancient temple in Jerusalem itself stands for something that came before it.

And that is the garden of Eden.

But the same image is picked up in the new testament,  
as a picture both of the church, and of the individual believer.

And what is the temple, whether in Eden, Jerusalem, or Otley in 2026,  
but a place where heaven and earth meet.

The temple is a place where we meet with and worship God,  
a place where humanity and God dwell together in unity.

So when you see this image of the temple in the Old Testament,  
it refers to all these different levels all at once.

St Paul says that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

And St Peter says that we are each being built together as living stones,  
into a dwelling place for God.

Mary understood that God wanted to meet with her,  
that God was meeting with her in the person of Jesus.

Mary understood that she was a temple,  
a place of devotion and worship and communion  
with the Holy God of heaven.

Mary understood that in her body heaven and earth came together.

But what is at the heart of a temple but an altar.

And an altar is a place of sacrifice.

Forgiveness of sins was achieved, temporarily,  
through the animal sacrifices of the Jewish Temple;  
but they were only ever meant to point forward to the one true sacrifice for sins.

No longer would sacrifices need to be offered on a regular basis,  
because Jesus himself, the perfect spotless lamb of God,  
has atoned for the sins of the whole world.

So, we no longer have physical altars,  
(indeed, the Jerusalem temple was destroyed within 40 years  
of Jesus prophesying exactly that)

We don't have physical altars,  
but we do have spiritual altars – built in our hearts,  
where we offer sacrifices not for the forgiveness of sins,  
but for the praise of his name!

To thank him for giving us what we didn't deserve – mercy,  
and not giving us what we did deserve – judgement.

And so great is his mercy, his amazing love for us,

that we present unto him, as the prayer book poetically phrases it,  
ourselves, our souls and bodies,  
to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.

Now, none of us will have reached a place of utter and complete surrender to God;  
all of us, I guess, are still holding various things,  
various depths, of ourselves, back from God,  
but that is the journey that following Jesus takes us on.

It's not a relationship of equality.  
yes, it's a relationship of love, and complete safety,  
but our relationship with God will always be asymmetrical.  
he is always greater, always higher,  
and we must, if we are to be in Christ at all,  
humble ourselves under his will,  
and his written word, Holy Scripture.

I know from some of the feedback that we have recently received,  
that some of you think I speak about this aspect of faith too much.

This internal, spiritual aspect.

Well, I won't apologise for that,  
and the reason is that if we don't at least desire and pursue  
this posture of humility and surrender with Jesus,  
this intimacy and communion with him,  
sitting like Mary at Jesus' feet, soaking in his presence,  
well, in God's vineyard we are like a branch broken off from the vine.  
Cut off from the source of life,

spiritually dead.

And if this is true of us as a church,  
we are no longer on a journey to becoming  
a place for everyone with Christ at the centre  
we're more like Martha.

A place for everyone with Christ .... somewhere. Not sure where.

And so I want, this year, to reemphasise the shift in focus  
between being a place for ministry to people,  
to being a community of living stones  
built in a temple, a dwelling place for the living God.

A place to minister to God.

And its my heart's greatest desire is that God would dwell manifestly in our midst.

Now, if that's happening,

if we function as a temple for ministering to the manifest presence of God,  
offering him sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving,  
and if Christ is at the centre of this Church,  
we really will be a place for everyone.

Not just the sorted, the got it together, the nice and tidy,

– and yes they're welcome too,

but also the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes,  
the poor, the lonely, drug addicted;

if Christ is at the centre,

O there'll be murderers, there'll be abusers,

there'll be every flavour of broken humanity you can imagine.

And when they come to Jesus

they will receive grace and truth.

And grace will tell them:

you are loved, you are welcomed, you are not beyond mercy,

Christ has made a way home for you.

And truth will tell them:

you do not have to remain as you are.

There is a new way to live,

a new humanity to put on,

a holiness into which the Spirit is lovingly forming us

as returning sons and daughters of the Most High.

This is fruit of the water life

that flows from the temple of true worship.

But there will be other fruit too.

Because as the river God begins to flow deep and strong

from the altars of our hearts, and the altar of his church,

wherever the river flows everything will live.

Just as sin divides us

from both God

and one another,

so our reunion – made possible through Jesus – is twofold.

Justification, on the vertical plain

– so that we may be reunited with God in love,

and justice, on the horizontal plain,

so that we may be reunited with each other in love.

These two aspects are both essential,

and that's why they are reflected in the great commandment,

that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength,

and love our neighbour as ourselves.

And so we as a church are called to move with Jesus

with a heart overflowing with his love for us,

out into the world around us to serve, tend, heal, and love.

Which is beautifully summarised in Micah 6.8:

*And what does the Lord require of you?*

*To act justly and to love mercy*

*and to walk humbly with your God.*

But if we want to see the life of our church

bear more fruit in the world around us in the year to come,

if we want to see new ministries spring up,

ministries to heal the sick, to welcome the stranger, the refugee,

to comfort the hurting, to walk alongside the addicted,

it all begins when we take the posture Mary took,

and place ourselves squarely at the feet of Jesus,

fixing our eyes on him,

soaking in his great mercy and love for us,

ministering to the manifest presence of God,

from where the fresh water, the life of the world, begins to flow.

Lastly, I need to speak to the capacity we all have to hurt each other.

You may be very at ease at Otley Parish Church,

and unaware of any painful disagreement, division,

but safe to say our transformation into the likeness of Christ is ongoing.

Not yet complete.

I'm not laying blame,

I'm not taking sides in any conflict,

I'm just naming the fact

that there has in 2025 and over recent months,

been pain in the life of our church.

And it strikes me that the salty water of tears,

the bitter water of hurt, offense, suspicion and judgement,

can only be made fresh by the inflow of the water of life,

that trickles out from the under the altar of true worship,

the altar on which we search our hearts before God,

each one of us, myself very much included,

confess our sins,

receive his forgiveness,

and laying ourselves down once more

as living sacrifices.

And it is my prayer that as we go forward into the year to come,

we will recommit to sitting like Mary at Jesus' feet.

Humbly putting ourselves under his will,

under his word,

and love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength,  
and our neighbour as ourselves.

Because in that way what is now bitter and salty,

what is now barren and deserted

both within this church and in the world outside,

will in time become fresh, will be healed, restored,

and abundantly fruitful

because of the water of life that flows from the presence of God.

AMEN.

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