

Ask the Lord of the Harvest

Date: 23 August 2020, 11th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: 2020 Vision Check In

Texts: Luke 10:1-16; Ephesians 4:11-16

Last week I began by suggesting that the pandemic has brought about a spiritual crisis in Western culture. The gods of technology, pleasure, money and politics that we've placed our faith in have been shown to be false and failing. This has created a crisis of Hope. But this spiritual crisis is at the same time an incredible opportunity for the church as we hold out the sure and certain hope of the gospel. That is that through Jesus we can have peace with God now, we have the hope of glory in the future, and the resources to endure suffering in the present. And this of course is not only for us as individuals. Jesus empowers us, through the Holy Spirit, to walk alongside others in their suffering and so to offer them hope too.

If the church is to seize this opportunity, it must find spiritual renewal itself. Now, I hope when you hear this you're not just thinking of the church as an institution, although this is true. The church begins with you. That is to say, each one of us, you and I need spiritual renewal to not only find our way through this crisis, but more than that, to thrive and hold high the hope we have in Jesus. If Jesus is not burning bright in our hearts and flooding our lives with peace and joy, what can we offer to others? We too are tempted to look to the gods of technology, pleasure, money and politics for our own security and future. Maybe the Holy Spirit is using covid to break their hold on us, so that we can again set our hopes firmly on the only solid Rock there is, Jesus.

So this morning I wanted to spend some looking at how we can cultivate our hope in Jesus, how we might find that personal and corporate spiritual renewal that we need for ourselves and to hold out that hope to our neighbours. We'll look at 2 points. Leading the Self and Leading Others.

Leading the Self

One of the things I'm acutely aware of in leading St George's is that my own spiritual life and health has a direct impact on not just my family, but also on you, my church family. As you hopefully have read in my annual report we have identified leadership development as the key thing we need to focus on as a church in the next 6-12 months. But leadership starts with leadership of the self. The second movement of our vision is that we would see people ***transformed by the light of Christ***. In Christ God welcomes us as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us where we are. We look for God to transform us by his Holy Spirit through what you might call the ordinary means of grace. These are

- Corporate Worship
- Personal Prayer and Bible reading
- Bible Study Groups
- Serving in Ministry
- Giving Generously
- Gracious Witness

When we speak about leadership of the self in a Christian context, integral to that is cultivating our connection with God. Personal prayer and Bible reading are key spiritual practices that help us to cultivate that connection. How did Jesus cultivate his connection with his heavenly Father? As we read the gospels again and again we see Jesus withdrawing from the crowds to spend time alone with God in prayer. Vital to our spiritual life is habitual solitude with God.

We're bombarded with so many different voices all the time clamouring for our attention. We may be afraid of being alone with our own thoughts and so we need a soundtrack - the radio, the TV, a podcast, Facebook. But we need to deliberately seek God by stepping back, unplugging and being still. As we do so we can come to a place of prayer where we are attending to God. Different things will work for each of us. Some may find the routine of a set prayers work. For others it may be listening to worship music. For some it may be walking in the beauty of creation. Whatever it is, the key thing is that you are deliberate about making time for solitude with God. As your thoughts rush through your mind, give them over to God. Ask him to come and speak.

As we are still, we read God's word the Bible. I know many of you follow Bible reading plans. Some of you have told me how much you've enjoyed reading the Bible through a year with Nicky Gumble. The YouVersion phone app has lots of great plans. If you're stuck for what to read and how to read, have a chat with me or someone else at church. We read the Bible because it is the place where God speaks to us. We do so being open to let the Holy Spirit interrogate our hearts. But we also do so asking God to nourish our souls, to remind us of his promises and renew our hope. Jesus says, "People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

As we're quiet, as we read God's word, so we can also bring our prayers and the worries of our hearts to him. In Philippians Paul says, "Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Along with solitude, prayer and Scripture I would add rest and worship or thanksgiving. Downing tools, mentally putting aside our labours and resting is a discipline that builds our trust in God. There is always something more to do in pastoral ministry. I find I have to remind myself that it is God who keeps the world turning. He holds us and our projects and will provide for our needs so we can stop.

And we can give thanks. The discipline of attending to God's blessings and giving him thanks brings us out of an unhealthy navel gazing and grumbling. It's a discipline that builds our spiritual muscles to face adversity and suffering.

We need these personal practices or spiritual disciplines through which we can cultivate our connection with God all times, but I want to encourage you to work at them now especially because we don't know if and when we'll face a second wave and some enforced solitude! Because this is not going away anytime soon. We are going to have to learn endurance.

Leading Others

We've looked at leading the self. Let's consider leading others.

At our staff retreat in June we identified leadership development as a key hurdle we need to pass in order to grow as a church. This has not been part of our culture as a church, but I'm convinced the Holy Spirit is leading us to change this culture. This will be our key focus as a church for the next 6-12 months.

In Luke 10 Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." How does the Lord of the harvest answer this prayer? In the very next verse Jesus says, "Go! I am sending you..." If you are a follower of Jesus, if you are Christian, then Jesus sends you to go and work in his harvest field. You may feel like Jesus says, a lamb among wolves. Weak and foolish. Good! That means you are in a place of humility where you will be forced to rely on him rather than yourself.

But, we do not go alone. Did you notice that Jesus sent out the 72 in pairs. Sharing our faith and growing in the Christian life is something we do together. We go with others for two reasons. First, mutual support. And second, so that we can train others. That's why we've been working on building teams at St George's. Whether that is the Kids Church team, the Welcoming team, the Cleaning team, the staff team, Parish Council, the music ensemble. They are all teams so we can support each other and where those more mature in the faith can disciple those younger.

They say that we retain less than 10% of information that we hear in a lecture. That jumps to 20% of information we read. 50% that we discuss. 75% that we do and 90% that we teach. The quickest way for you to grow as a Christian is leading someone else in the faith. That responsibility is a powerful motivator for you to learn and grow yourself. I've seen this in the Thursday Bible study that I've attended on and off. Back in 2018 I was leading the group but for various reasons I was not able to be there each study. I asked different members to take turns in leading. I've never seen people put so much work into preparing a Bible study! It was lovely when after a couple of years in Sydney Karen returned to the group. She told me how much everyone had grown.

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul says that the job of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers is to equip God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built as each member plays its part. Tristan and my job as clergy is to equip you as God's people to do ministry. That's what the word ministry means - service.

Taking responsibility for leading yourself and stepping up to lead others, even in small ways, it cuts against our consumer culture. This has trained us to worship comfort and avoid difficulty. You can approach your spiritual life like that as well, and come to church expecting the "professionals" to do all the work for you. But you'll never really taste what God has for you if you stay comfortable and outsource your spiritual life. Growth means purification, letting the dross get burned off so that the refined metal shines. Growth comes from taking

responsibility, for yourself and for others. That's what we're called to do - love our brothers and sisters, love our neighbours.

As you take that responsibility you'll discover what you don't know and you'll want to learn. And that's what Tristan and I are here to do - teach you and train you. St Paul wrote to his protege Timothy - *The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*¹

There you see 4 generations of Christians - Paul who disciplined Timothy, who is to pass on the faith to reliable people, who can teach others. For St George's to grow that has to become part of our DNA.

That's why Tristan has stepped back from music. To give space for others to step up and take on leading us in worship. That's why he's training Bethany and Jake as Kids Church leaders. That's why we've started our Bible Study leader training program. Because the harvest is plentiful and we clergy are too few. Our Bible Study groups are engine rooms of spiritual transformation. We need more of them and therefore more leaders to be able to disciple more people. To teach the basic truths of the Christian faith, to teach people how to pray, how to read their Bible, how to shake free of the idol of wealth and give generously trusting that God will provide, how to share our hope in Jesus generously and winsomely to our friends and neighbours starved of hope.

So the question for each of us is who is your Paul and who is your Timothy? Who are you learning from and who are you training up? Who are being disciplined by and who are you discipling? May the Lord of the harvest generously answer the prayer he asks us to pray in sending workers and may we have the reaping an abundant harvest to his glory.

¹ 2 Timothy 2:2