

Growing and Bearing Fruit.

Date: 25 August 2024, 12th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's

Series: 2024 Vision Check In

Texts: Psalm 84, Matthew 9.35-38, Colossians 1.9-14, (2.6-7, 4.2-6)

This week I read an article on why people in wealthy nations are not having children. The writer says, “in listening closely to people’s stories, I’ve detected a broader thread of uncertainty—about the value of life and a reason for being. Many in the current generation of young adults don’t seem totally convinced of their own purpose or the purpose of humanity at large, let alone that of a child.”¹ The article puts its finger on a deep malaise in our society: a lack of meaning and purpose. This is the society we live in. It makes me think of Jesus’ response when he saw the crowds: “he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

It’s been 12 months since we launched our 10 year vision.

Our Vision is that by 2033 St George’s will be a vibrant and welcoming community of more than 130 followers of Jesus who are growing spiritually and being transformed to be a blessing and to testify to our surrounding community.

This is our vision, because that is where we want to be by 2033 so that we can be the Light our city needs. God has called us as St George’s to be the Light on the Hill. Our mission is to see people Drawn to the Light of Christ, be Transformed by the Light of Christ and Sent out to Shine the Light of Christ. Our AGM is a chance to celebrate and give thanks to God for what has been accomplished over the past year, to check in on how we are going as a church and to look forward to the coming year. This sermon is meant to complement my published report.

In a society groping around in the darkness, without meaning, without purpose, harassed and helpless, hungry and thirsty for hope, we have such an opportunity to hold out the light of Christ, even as our building stands as a beacon of hope over Hobart. The harvest is ripe. The question for us is are we ready to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers, and are we ready to be those whom God has sent? And that is something for us together here as we shine the light of Christ from this place. People do come. Some of you are new and have joined us this year. We have on Sundays an average 12 more adults and 4 more kids than last year. Are we prepared to make new friends, to make space in our lives to welcome others who come

¹ Christine Emba, ‘The Real Reason People Aren’t Having Kids’, *The Atlantic*, 1.8.24

through our doors? Morning tea, church lunches, our gardening bees, Bible Study groups. All these are avenues for relationship, but the question is are we willing to make room for new relationships, to welcome and build friendships here at church.

The Christian faith is all about growth. Paul opens his letter to the church in Colossae by thanking God that the gospel of Christ is bearing fruit and growing throughout the world, even among them. I love how Paul prays for them:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, **10** so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, **11** being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, **12** and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.²

What a prayer for growth for us too! Notice there are two aspects of growth here. First is upwards. That God would fill us with knowledge of his will, with wisdom and understanding from the Holy Spirit. That we may grow in the knowledge of God, that we would be strengthened with all power, that we would have great endurance and patience. That we would give joyful thanks to God. It's a picture of a rich and flourishing life with God. Not just a head knowledge, but a personal and intimate knowing God in the whole of life. This is the knowledge of relationship, that produces endurance, patience, joy because we are secure knowing that God knows and loves us.

Second, growth is outwards - this is "living a life worthy of the Lord and bearing fruit in every good work." That is the dynamic: the closer we grow to God, the deeper we grow in our relationship with him, the more fruit we will produce - doing all the good that God has called us to do. Shining like stars in this dark world. Bringing the light and love and peace of Christ through our acts of kindness and justice.

So often the best way to grow is through leading others. I know I find the more responsibility I feel for others, the more aware I become of my own weakness and limitation and inadequacy, and the more I'm driven to prayer. I see more of how my sin and selfishness gets in the way of me doing what I need to do, and so I have to bring myself before God and ask his Spirit to change me and so I grow spiritually. As we look out to others, we look up to God. At the same time as we look up to God, we see the needs of others and so are drawn to serve them, to look out.

² Colossians 1.9-12

That's my hope and prayer for each one of us. That we'd be caught up in God's kingdom. That we'd rest in the security of having been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son. And then, as children of light, to be captivated by Jesus' vision of the kingdom, his compassion for people, his vision for growth. That we'd pursue him in those spiritual disciplines of prayer, of confession, of reading Scripture, of Sunday worship. At the same time we'd be open to see others around us, to their needs and how we can help them grow. So 2 questions: How are you seeking to grow spiritually? And Who are you investing in? Be that through prayer, encouragement, care, or maybe even mentoring in how to be a Christian. As we are open to the Holy Spirit to shake us up and get us looking outward, so God will use us to grow his church here - both in maturity and in number.

I've spoken of growth in maturity and number because we want to see God's kingdom grow for the glory of his name and for the blessing of our neighbours in this dark world. But there is also for us a financial need for growth. Since I've been at St George's we have run a deficit budget every year. We have been using savings given by previous generations here to pay our bills for today. While our bank balance is still healthy, it is not sustainable to spend more than our income each year.

One of our 2026 goals is:

Financially supporting the future of St George's as a vibrant presence within Battery point by developing and implementing a plan for the long term use of our site and establishing financially sustainable budgets.

In March Parish Council developed a Capital Works schedule where we set out around \$250,000 of necessary maintenance and renewal work across the church, hall and rectory over the next 3 years. Our AV upgrade earlier this year is a big item on that list of works, and I want to thank especially Andrew and Al for overseeing that project. The diocese has engaged a firm in Sydney that aims to help churches to enhance and better utilise their property to serve their communities. We will be working with them.

In terms of financially sustainable budgets, we've been working towards breaking even by 2027. That means sustained growth in our annual collections. These will grow in 2 ways - people giving more and more people giving. Over the last 2 years we've grown our collections by \$30,000. I thank God for this growth, and I thank you for your generosity. Later today we'll pass a budget setting the ambitious target of an increase in giving of \$28,000. Some of this will come from people increasing their giving. A new budget with a new financial year is an opportunity for all of us to review our giving. If you don't give or don't give regularly, can I particularly encourage you to take a look at your finances, and commit to regularly giving a

proportion of your income to St George's. The 'Your Part in the Budget' flyer lays out what this might look like depending on your income. This is a gift to God, who so generously gives us all that we need for life and salvation. It helps pay wages and keep the lights on. It's a spiritual discipline that will help you grow your trust in God and a spirit of generosity. It is a powerful, concrete way you can contribute to what we do as the Light on the Hill.

But second, Lord willing most of our growth in giving will come from new people joining us at St George's. Our 2026 Vision lays out clear goals for how we will grow numerically. I'm delighted that this year we ran Alpha and we will do that again in term 2, 2025. I'm working on finding the right baptism and confirmation course to help those who do Alpha learn the basics of being a Christian in terms of belief, ethics and spiritual disciplines. This is a key step in our engagement pathway. But even more, it's a vital step in people's growth. The word disciple means 'learner'. And to become a Christian is to become an apprentice with Jesus as your master. To be a Christian means leaving the old life behind and learning to walk in the new life God calls you to. Without taking that apprenticeship, it's much harder to sustain faith and to grow into all that God has for you. If you would like to help in discipling new Christians, please let me know.

A second focus area for us in the coming year is Youth Ministry. Our 2026 goal is to "develop and implement a sustainable long term plan for youth ministry". To this end we have received a grant from the diocese to employ a one day a week Youth Intern for 2 years. We already have a small group of teens, and more kids will be growing out of Kids Church in the coming years. We partner with Crossroads Presbyterian in hosting their XYZ youth group. The youth trainee will join their XYZ team and run our youth discussion group on Sunday mornings (currently run by Angie). This will mean we have someone focussed on our youth, but also that this person can be trained and supported in a team environment. We will see how God develops this ministry. I invite you to pray with me that God would raise up the right person for this role.

Church only happens with everyone using their gifts. I want to thank each one of you for what you bring to St George's, but there are a few I particularly need to name. I want to thank Mike for his financial leadership and governance expertise as Treasurer over the last 3 years. You've done a huge amount of work and we have been so blessed because of you. I also want to thank Jeanne who has served as synod rep for I don't know how long. We've really appreciated your contribution to PC as well. Thank you also to Karen for graciously saying yes to serving on PC for the last year, despite your loathing of meetings, money and property! I also want to thank those staying on PC, our wardens - Simon, Mark and Sarah, as

well as Anne. There is always a lot to do on PC, and you serve with dedication and passion. Thank you also to Al. We've loved having you on staff, I'm still pinching myself that you signed up for 2 days a week in a voluntary capacity. You have given so much of yourself, and we've loved having your whole family with us. Finally thank you Amy for all you do. Your church profile says you like building and maintaining systems that help people thrive. That is absolutely what you do, and we are all so blessed by you and your work!

Growth is uncomfortable because it means change. Change in the way we do things. Change in relationships. Change in our own patterns of thought and behaviour. Change as we respond to God's call on our lives. Stepping out of our comfort zones to serve and to share Christ with others, and exercising that dependence upon God. Pruning makes trees more fruitful! I expect we will feel growing pains over the coming year. Jesus says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." I invite you to join me in following Jesus' words and asking God to send out workers, even each one of us. Will you pray with me that God will build his church here at St George's? That he will grow us in number and in maturity? It's a bold prayer! So we also ask that God will give us the grace and strength to hear and obey his call that disturbs our settled lives. And we know that growth means experiencing the Holy Spirit at work in and amongst us, and we can rejoice in Christ's light shining through us.

Let me finish with these words from Ephesians:

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

25 August 2024