

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Sunday morning worship on the 8th November 2020
Remembrance Sunday

Welcome

Call to Worship

Hymn MP 454 Majesty

Prayers of Approach, Thanksgiving

Scripture reading Luke 4: 14-21

Reflection

When I was a child, I had an elderly relative called Uncle Joe who would often come to my family home for some company. He had fought in the First World War at the Battle of the Somme, but never spoke about it until I persuaded him to help me with a school project. I asked him what he remembered and he started telling me about the terrible conditions and some of the terrible things he'd seen. A tear rolled down his cheek and it was the first time I'd ever seen a man cry.

Then, after he had spoken for a few minutes, he suddenly leapt to his feet and banged his hands down on the sideboard. It was the first time I'd ever heard an adult swear as he said something like, (and I'll omit the swear words), "Was it worth it? We thought it would be the war to end wars, but people don't learn. We keep killing each other, so what did they die for?" I've omitted a lot of expletives. He was so angry because he felt that a dream of a better world had been crushed. I know that people fought in that war for many complex reasons, but the idea that a dream, a glorious vision of a peaceful world, had been destroyed hit me hard. I understood then that dreams and visions are pointless unless people work hard to make them a reality.

18 years ago I was lucky enough to study in Atlanta, the birthplace and resting place of Dr Martin Luther King, the great civil rights activist. He famously had a dream that he shared from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. It was a dream of wonderful future where people would be treated well and with justice irrespective of their race, colour, religion, creed or anything else - a beautiful, wonderful, inspiring vision that captivated the minds of millions at the time and still does today. Yet I wonder how he would feel if he were alive today to see the terrible injustices that so many people around the world face, often because of their race, colour, religion or creed.

The dream, the vision, has not become reality despite many improvements since the 1960s. How tragic is it that we still need to remind people that Black Lives Matter because they act as if black lives don't matter? The beautiful dream of Dr King was rooted in his passionate faith in Jesus Christ whose love is radical and inclusive and embraces all people, not just us, not just the people like us and not just the people we find easy to love. We have to hold on to dreams and visions and work at turning them into reality.

The bible has many stories of God putting dreams and visions into the minds of men and women throughout the generations, and surely, Jesus was the greatest visionary of them all. He spoke of a kingdom unlike the earthly kingdoms, where there would be justice, compassion and love, especially for the poorest and weakest - a kingdom where money didn't dominate lives - a wonderful kingdom, called the Kingdom of God. Not a heavenly vision for when we die, but a vision of what could be real in this world if only people would turn to God and live according to God's beautiful values.

The trouble is that when we look at the world, we see so much that surely displeases God. War, terror, bullying, abuse, indifference to suffering and injustice, prejudice, intolerance, greed, loneliness. The list could go on – it is long, too long and we are called to respond, not by looking the other way, not by burying our heads in the sand, not by denying the fallen state of the world, but by embracing the divine vision of a kingdom growing around us and within us - growing in Sheffield - a kingdom where God's love is at the heart of all things.

So in Sheffield, there is the enormous responsibility and the glorious privilege of together, with God, building up the Kingdom of God. Yes, through worship, prayer, learning, fellowship, pastoral care etc., but even more so through active community involvement - not just talking a good faith, but living a good faith, empowered by God. Sometimes Christian communities are strong enough to do effective mission by themselves, whilst most work better as teams, embracing all who share the vision. The harsh reality we face in an increasingly unbelieving world is that there are not enough ordained ministers of word and sacrament and the number is falling fast. So people are learning to work together and ministers work increasingly as teams. Team Sheffield's task is to work prayerful with God to make God's vision for Sheffield a greater reality every day. We need God as God needs us.

So what is your dream for the good people of Sheffield? Do you dream of a place where people understand the power of God's love to transform people and situations, then work with God to make dreams into reality? Do you dream of a Christian community that, in God's power, is making a real difference to the lives of many? Well, you obviously do dream such dreams, because your churches are already doing quite a lot to reveal divine love and kingdom values. The Team Sheffield profile is impressive.

You don't spend your lives dreaming about past glories, so much as about what may be possible if we travel closely with God, together, as a team. The vision for Team Sheffield is still developing, but the ordained ministers of word and sacrament, the elders and lots of people, will dare to get a bit excited about what God wants and what we can do to help God turn dreams into reality.

I'm a dreamer, but a realistic dreamer, who tests his understanding of God's will, and stays open-minded because God is always surprising us. I began my journey of faith, learning to dream God's dream, when after 28 years of staunch atheism, a Christian friend challenged me to read a bit of scripture and see if I still felt the same. A simple scriptural invitation that is at the heart of much good evangelism, "Come and See". I started reading, determined that it would affirm my view that religion and faith were foolish self-delusion, but God had another idea.

Reading the bible did nothing for me, until I got to that passage from Luke 4. Jesus stands up, opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah. Something about the reading got to me. I kept reading it again and again. "The Spirit has anointed me to proclaim Good News to the

poor.” What good news? Which poor people? “To proclaim freedom to prisoners” What prisoners? “Recovery of sight to the blind” Which blind people? Why? “To set the oppressed free” Who are these oppressed people who need to be set free? As I kept reading it and asking the questions, again and again, I suddenly realised that I wasn’t just thinking – I was praying, to the God that I thought I didn’t believe in - and it didn’t feel like a waste of time – it felt good. So the journey began. I felt myself being set free and given spiritual sight to start seeing God’s vision for my life and the world.

Of course, the questions keep coming. How can we, the people who are part of the Body of Christ, help God bring Good News to the physically and spiritually poor, how can we help God set more people free from all that enslaves them, how can we help people see the truth of God and what God offers us all, how we can we help people to see the beauty of divine love and how precious they and all people are to God? Dreaming, praying, doing – they all go together if you want to make disciples and, in unity, build up the kingdom of God.

So, we have big decisions to make. Does God want me to be part of Team Sheffield? If we decide the answer is no, then we move on as friends. If we decide the answer is yes, then we move on together, as friends, led by God, dreaming, praying, doing, journeying together as a team with God alone as the boss, turning dreams and visions into reality with commitment and prayer. As we do so, we honour the dreams and the sacrifices of so many people like my old Uncle Joe, like Dr King, like so many of us, like Jesus, creating a better world. What could be a greater privilege? May God grants us wisdom and may God’s kingdom come. Amen.

Act of Remembrance

Song A new Commandment

Sharing our prayer needs

Prayers of Intercession

Lord’s Prayer

Hymn MP 51 Be thou my vision

Blessing