

Launching St Michael's Purpose Statement – 17th January 2010

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Deuteronomy 6.1-9 Mark 12.28-34

Our Purpose:

To journey inward and upward to the God we know in Jesus, and

To journey outward to other people and to all creation

The four churches each now have in place a Local Leadership Team (LLT) to head up the ministry and mission of each congregation. Our LLT is made up of Peter Bradley, Matt Lewis, Rachel Mayers, Hazel Hidden, David Wightman, Andy Bull, myself (Graham Turner), and we are looking at add Liz Heathcote soon. These LLTs will enhance the leadership of our churches and ensure that we have 'plural leadership' in our churches rather than the traditional pattern of having 'single leadership' in one Vicar or Rector. Our LLT has now been meeting since last summer.

One of the early questions that members of the LLT raised was "What are we trying to do?" It was clear we, as a church, needed clarity about our purpose. After all we do not exist as St Michael's church just to make people happy, or boost our numbers or do loads of different things. So why do we exist?

After much deliberation we came up with the Purpose Statement which is as the head of this paper, which has been approved by our Church Council. It is based on the summary of the law from Mark 12.28-34. In this passage one of the Jewish scribes came to Jesus after seeing that he answered the Sadducees with wisdom and insight. He wanted to test Jesus himself to see if he really did know what he was talking about. So he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" He then commended Jesus on answering so well when he said:

'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'

Jesus in turn commended the scribe by saying, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

So to be close to the kingdom of God is to fulfil these two great commandments. But these two laws are not pieces of legislation that we must fearfully obey. God will not love us more if we obey them, he will not be more devoted to us if we put them into practice – he loves us far more than we can ever know already. These are laws or commands that are to be fulfilled out of love not fear. It is by doing what they say that we can enjoy whole and healthy living. This is how we live 'in the image of God' as he originally made us. In a sense this is a starting point rather than an end point to achieve.

We have the two aspects to our purpose statement based on these words of Jesus, (which were themselves rooted in the Old Testament story of God's people.)

First, we have the journey inward and upward to God. Being a 'journey' implies that our growth towards the God we know in Jesus is an on going matter. And there are two parts to this first journey.

a. There has to be an inward journey. It has been said that the inward journey that we should each make to get to know who we really are parallels the inward journey to God, who is within each of us. We bear the image of God, and we talk about the Holy Spirit living within us. The life of the God we seek to know resides in our very being. Unfortunately most of us are reluctant to make this inner journey as we feel that

there will be nothing there – that there is no substance to us. We couldn't be more wrong. There are amazing riches within us for us to draw on if only we knew it. Our 'external' lives our nowhere near as robust as we believe them to be – but we seem to spend more time there.

b. Then we have to make the upward journey to God. If God is only regarded as within us, then it is hard to conceive of God as being the source of the entire universe. There is also a tendency to view of God as some sort of private God. But God cannot be captured in such a way and 'kept in our pocket'. We are learning today from the New Physics that there are so many parallels between faith and quantum science. We are finding that both physics and faith have to deal with paradox, and at some points we seem we could be talking about the same things but just using different language.

The second journey we have to take is the journey outward which again has two aspects to it.

a. For too long we have as churches felt that others should journey into church, to us. But the call to love entails us making the move. This journey is not, though, one that we make from a position of power or being well-resourced, but one that should be taken in vulnerability. This is how Jesus came to us, of course. It is also not a journey we make to 'do something' to other people, as it is in the encounter with other people that we may be transformed and changed as well those we move towards. The word 'compassion' means to suffer with, to participate in the pain with the person. This is different to sympathy that does not commit so readily in the same way as compassion.

b. Then the outward journey also entails moving closer towards creation itself. We have lived abusive and disconnected from the natural order for too long and we know we have to change. Sometimes we have had the idea that God wanted to save us *from* the world, as if it was all bad. But the plan of God is to save everything. In Luke's gospel he is given the name 'Saviour of the World'. We need therefore to participate in God's work of saving and healing the planet.

We have no statement here about building the church. We believe that if we fulfil our Purpose Statement then we *are* church. Once we are clear about this we can then deal with the very practical and necessary issues of running the institution of our church. Ultimately it is Jesus who will build the church. In the book of Acts we read that the disciples sought to fulfil the commands of Jesus. At one point 3,000 people were added to the church in one day. Not too long afterwards we read that Stephen was murdered when he made the same stand. We are not working for a specific outcome, just seeking to be obedient in love.

It is an interesting question to ask which word is the most important word in our Purpose Statement. It could well be the underlined 'and'. If we only make the journey to God and ignore the call to journey outwards, then we could be accused of idolatry. On the other hand, if we only make the journey outward and ignore the journey to God, we could then be accused of activism. The truth of the matter is that both are needed to fulfil the law of love and to become fully human beings.