

Introduction

Thank you for your reports and ministries (I refer you to the minutes of the Open Meeting). My annual report this year is based on the lectionary readings for this Sunday which are about the need to focus on God to avoid temptation and lack of growth.

The Israelites under Moses direction in the wilderness had lost focus.

The Corinthian church under Greek and Roman influence had lost focus.

Today I want to talk about a loss of focus, using the text of 1 Corinthians, which has a structure rather like a sandwich.

The 'bread' of the sandwich

At the beginning and the end of 1 Cor Paul deals with two very fundamental matters of belief; crucifixion and resurrection

The crucifixion

The word of the cross is an offence to the Greeks, in part because they reject the notion that the body has any value. So they sneer at the idea that a body on a cross can bring spiritual salvation. It is largely because they have failed to realise the importance of the cross that they are divided into cliques over other less important matters. Paul has to remind them that none of their church leaders was crucified for them – only Jesus. So why are they following human leaders?

The resurrection

At the end of 1 Cor Paul deals with their doubts about the resurrection. As Greeks they would have believed in the immortality of the soul and would not have seen any value in the resurrection of the body. P has to correct their thinking and help them to perceive the future in bodily terms. Just as Jesus had a new body after the resurrection that could eat fish and cook breakfast, so Christians will have a bodily existence in the future.

The Filling of the Sandwich

This concerns behaviour. Paul was dealing firstly with the report that he had received from Chloe's household about what was going wrong and secondly with the questions arising from the letter brought by Chloe's family. So this large section is a mixture of the two. These were examples of the problems that beset the church:

- ❖ Division – cliques had arisen among various leaders
- ❖ Litigation – church members were taking each other to court rather than settling matters among themselves

Specifically from 1 Cor 10.1-13

The people under Moses shared the same baptism and Eucharist as one another yet God was not pleased with their sinfulness and a plague struck many of them down. This passage serves as an example for us and to instruct us – a warning from history. The Corinthians were called to sit up and pay attention and so are we, that observing the sacraments means nothing if our lives give way to temptations constantly. Paul highlights four temptations: idolatry, sexual

immorality, putting Christ to the test and complaining. If we lack integrity our worship together is meaningless. We must stand firm against temptation and the destructive lie that it contains.

Temptation to complain

When we complain it betrays our lack of focus on God's provision and sustenance and all that is good about life and others. There's a old Jewish fable about two couples and a wise man.

A couple leave town A and go to Town B. They meet a wise man who asks, 'Why did you leave town A?' They replied, 'The people there were so lovely we're sad to leave but we felt God calling us to join the people of town B'. The wise man responded, 'The people of town B are just as you found them in Town A. Do stay and join our town'

A little while later, another couple left town A and arrived in town B and met the same wise man who asks, 'Why did you leave town A?' They replied 'The people there were dreadful we couldn't wait to get away'. The wise man responded, 'The people of town B are just as you found them in Town A. I suggest you continue on your way to Town C – perhaps they'll be different there.

We need to stand firm against spiritual attack

Again and again a fortress has been stormed because its defenders thought that it could not be. In Revelation 3:3 the risen Christ warns the people of Sardis to be on the watch.

The Acropolis of Sardis was built on a jutting spur of rock that was held to be impregnable. When Cyrus was besieging it he offered a special reward to any who could find a way in. A certain soldier, Hyeroeades by name, was watching one day and saw a soldier in the Sardian garrison drop his helmet accidentally over the battlements. He saw him climb down after it and marked his path. That night he led a band up the cliffs by that very path and when they reached the top they found it quite unguarded; so they entered in and captured the citadel, which was too safe. Life is a chancy business; we must be ever on the watch.

What else do we learn from the readings about how to remain focussed on spiritual goals and resist temptation when it strikes?

Isaiah urges us to listen to God our provider, to seek Him while there is still time and remember all His good deeds to past generations. The prophet warns against spending money and labour 'on that which does not satisfy'. We focus on God our sustainer.

The psalmist also urges us to remember God as provider; we are to meditate on Him upon our beds and in the watches of the night. We focus on God our provider.

Luke shows that despite the riot in response to Pilates atrocities causing the tower of Siloam to collapse on some people, Jesus is not deterred because he is focussed on his mission, to die on the cross. We focus on Jesus our saviour, not who might or might be judged favourable by God.

The fig tree is used as an illustration of the people of Israel and their spiritual growth or lack thereof. Jesus' parable of the vineyard owner demonstrates that God will listen to appeals for leniency and compassion but that time does run out. As in Isaiah

'Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon him while he is near.'

Lost Focus

- ❖ The Israelites under Moses direction in the wilderness lost focus.
- ❖ The Corinthian church under Greek and Roman influence lost focus.
- ❖ We, the church of St Aldhelm's Bedminster under my leadership have lost focus.

I accept responsibility for that and commit today to reversing that trend and urge all of you to regain your primary focus not on fabric, finance or buildings as an end in themselves but merely as servants of the gospel and ministers of mission to all nations, not just to The Chessels.

I have allowed myself and others to devote too much attention to negativity and today I am reclaiming the direction as emphasising strengths not weaknesses, affirmative enquiry into the suggestions people make, focussing on spiritual gifts and how to release positive energy to join in with the real work of real mission, not just in this parish but wherever God sends us during a typical week.

I have agonised as to how to respond to the fact that several highly committed and integral members of this congregation have been angered and saddened, not by a difference of views, but a lack of charity grace and Christ-like biblical attitude when we bearing with one another's differences.

I am grateful yet again for God's word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit for providing the answer.

In response to the recent negativity, secrecy, gossiping and the latest Surprise survey attempting to undermine the DCC and subvert the agendas for the task groups, my response is to refer you to another chapter in the lectionary epistle for this Sunday. Here's what Paul says about the spiritual gifts of love in chapter thirteen:

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

If we cannot demonstrate love, everything else done here in the name of Christ is futile. There has been a lack of love which has been commented upon by relative newcomers and long-standing members. There has been a lack of respect for difference of personality, intellect and leadership style.

I speak on behalf of all those who graciously bear with one another in love but whose views have been under-represented. Many feel torn about the prospect of change and yet acknowledge that this is painful yet necessary for the long term furtherance of the gospel.

I make no apology for promoting enquiry into the proposal to share the space with St Francis and this was voted upon by ten to two by the DCC to explore openly and with excitement.

Equally, balanced and well-informed enquiry into the long-term viability of Chessel Street is also as much on the agenda because to test any proposal against the same criteria is appropriate.

There has been a lack of growth it was agreed during the past ten years and cliqueness problems – these were identified at first vision day. A new approach is clearly essential.

However, the analogy of a wedding where two different characters complement one another was reinforced by scripture in the lectionary the weekend of the second vision day and agreed as affirmation by some who are now opposed to it.

The idea of a fruit cocktail was also a colourful and rich picture of what could be possible if the two congregations were to join forces. The impression formed lately by several attendees at task groups is that the agreement to look into both proposals is not being undertaken as was agreed with a bias towards only looking into staying at the Chessel Street site come what may.

The task groups to my understanding are not devoting balanced time to each proposal even though the task group structure was agreed on that understanding. It was hoped that this would avoid divisiveness, this is not working as hoped for. Since the St F option is not getting heard I will remind you of your DCC's vote to explore the possibility.

The identified benefits of the sharing the space proposal

Are to enable everyone to focus on their spiritual gifts.

- ❖ Few of you wants to remain in property maintenance
- ❖ Many of you want to engage in mission spiritual growth and pastoral care.
- ❖ There is a complementarity of gifts
- ❖ St Francis has the infrastructure and some retired able to be around mid-week during the day. Many of you are time poor and skills-rich – we should apply these skills in a church context
- ❖ More money can be diverted to vital mission locally and internationally if it's not being drained by two large buildings which are only used for worship for two hours in a week of 168 hours. £12k per year spent on heating could fund a children's worker.
- ❖ A larger congregation creates possibilities to rise above critical mass and build in programmes for growth – at present STA is operating below critical mass and cannot run the building or comfortably put on a single Sunday service without over reliance on a very few

In reaction to the proposal, some people firstly took issue with communication despite it being open and transparent. Ironically several private meetings have been held by those complainants to which not everyone in the congregation was invited. Often at the back of church people have been openly grumbling about leadership when in the past too little and too much control has been blamed for a lack of numerical growth.

A primary concern seems to be about mission to The Chessels

But what evidence is there that any numerical growth has occurred as a direct result of the Chessel Street building – specifically, individuals coming to faith and remaining a member of the worshipping community in the last ten years? Many of you travel a distance to attend this church and spend your lives across the city and beyond. Almost no-one is defined by their immediate locality anymore.

Another question to ponder is this, ‘What can’t I do as a Christian meeting in a building on North Street that I can do on Chessel Street?’

Hear me when I say my overriding passion is to see the people of Bedminster come to know Christ and follow him. That I hope is your overarching focus too. Many of us will have differing ideas about how that might be achieved but in our varying opinions I beg you to bear with one another in love.

Drawing then on the principles from chapters nine and ten of 1 Cor how might we make Choices on Sensitive Issues

All of us make hundreds of choices every day. Most choices have no right or wrong attached to them – like what you wear or what you eat. But we always face decisions that carry a little more weight. We don’t want to do wrong, and we don’t want to cause others to do wrong, so how can we make such decisions? When trying to work out the best way forward why don’t you ask yourself the following questions drawn from the principles of chapters nine and ten of 1 Cor:

If I choose one course of action:

- ❖ Does it help my witness for Christ? (9:19-22)
- ❖ Am I motivated by a desire to help others know Christ. (9:23)
- ❖ Does it help me do my best? (9:25)
- ❖ Is it against a specific command in scripture and would thus cause me to sin? (10:12)
- ❖ Is it the best and most beneficial course of action? (10:23)
- ❖ Am I thinking only of myself, or do I truly care about the other person (10:24)
- ❖ Am I acting lovingly or selfishly?
- ❖ Will it cause someone else to sin? (10:32)

Conclusion

- ❖ The Israelites under Moses direction in the wilderness lost focus, and gave in to temptations
- ❖ The Corinthian church under Greek and Roman influence lost focus and gave in to temptations
- ❖ We, the church of St Aldhelm's Bedminster under my leadership have lost focus and have likewise given in to temptations.

I hope and pray you will join with your DCC in a commitment to reclaim the vital focus and ministry of this fellowship of believers as first and foremost a body of Christ about whom people will say, 'See how they love one another'.