

How can we be a GREAT church?

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, I pray that you would give us each here today a fresh vision of your kingdom.!

And I find myself on the annual meeting day. Very exciting, eh? And so I thought I'd take the opportunity very early on to just share my thoughts with you about where I sense God is leading us as a church.

And so this isn't about me sweeping in as a vicar and, you know, giving you my 20-point mega plan, you know, that sort of thing. At this stage, this is a process. And this is a process of seeing what gifts, we might call them charisms from the Greek, what charisms has God already given us as a church?

And seeing how he wants to fan them into flames. It's about seeing who we are in God's sight and what God is calling us to become.

And some of that is about noticing afresh. And it's great to come in sort of from the outside and to see already what God has placed into our hands and into our hearts.

[1 : 36] And then, as we move forward, through prayer, it's about perhaps letting go of those things that God doesn't want us to hold on to, but holding fast to the things that God wants to bring into fullness and to fruitfulness.

And that's really my role as leader, is to help discern these things, to articulate and show you what God is calling us to become and calling us towards.

And then releasing the whole people of God into that vision of the future until it starts to become a reality for us, making a difference to our individual and collective lives together and the difference to our surrounding community.

And for me, that process didn't start just a month ago, but it started when I saw the job advert for this place. And that was back last autumn, which I believe was nearly exactly the same time as you were doing a 24-7 prayer initiative.

Coincidence? Coincidence? Coincidence? And so I saw on paper what was on your heart for this church and for your community. And I know as that document was put together, a lot of care and prayer went into it.

[2 : 56] And that also came with a list of strategic priorities that you were already committed to. And what I saw excited me.

And I know that the type of leader you were looking for fitted really well with the type of person God was also making me to become. And so I came to interview, that's in December.

And as that sense of God calling myself and my family to be here with you became increasingly clear, obviously I heard more about the church and its character.

And I read some of the history and I started to meet some of you wonderful people. And now, a month in, as I say, even though I haven't met everyone in here yet, and I've barely learned how to open the door.

It's a real struggle. It's been a hard time. God has been incredibly gracious. And though my human insights and knowledge are only partial, God's already laid on quite a clear sense onto my heart about some of those charisms, some of those gifts that he sees amongst us and wants to fan into flames.

[4 : 06] And I've tested a few of those out with a few of the team. And they've confirmed that these kind of resonate and they could be from the Lord. And so on this annual meeting day, I thought, great. This is an opportunity to share with you just what I'm discerning because it's exciting.

And just to say, as I share today, do take a note of what resonates with you, what strikes you, because at the annual meeting, I'll just open up the floor to maybe hear a little bit about how your

sense God is responding to this.

So something to look forward to later. And to help me in all of this, the Lord led me to the passage that Deb read from Matthew chapter 18, the verses 1 to 5.

And I realised that another question I could be asking, we could be asking ourselves, if you forget all that preamble that I've just said, forget all of that. The question is, how can we be a great church?

How can we be a great church? Now, if that sounds a bit crass or you might lead us into comparing ourselves with other churches, let me, okay, I'll reframe the question. We'll have the question up on the board though. How can we be a great church?

[5 : 12] Maybe how within the kingdom of God can we be a great church? I think it's a good question. It's a fair question to ask. It's a question that I'm asking as I begin here.

So if that's the question, are you ready to hear the answer Jesus gives to that question? Yes. Are you sure? Because it's going to make you pretty uncomfortable, I can tell you. It made me uncomfortable, okay?

So brace yourselves. Because, of course, this question is a similar question to the one the disciples were asking Jesus. Verse 1 says, approaching Jesus, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Now, I suspect there was some comparison and some ambition behind this question. Here they are, the disciples. They're following this charismatic young rabbi from Galilee, who they've just come to realise is actually the promised Messiah.

The one appointed to bring in God's kingdom into the earth. And if that's what he's up to, they're thinking, I want to be an important part of that.

[6 : 18] Let me in. So before we continue, let me just be clear. Let's get clear on what is meant by this phrase, kingdom of heaven.

Kingdom of heaven. Matthew's gospel is the only gospel to repeatedly use this phrase. Well, the other gospels, Mark, Luke and John, they refer to, quite constantly, the kingdom of God.

As I mentioned last week, if you were here, Matthew's particularly writing to a Jewish audience, who, as a way of honouring God, would not usually utter or write his name.

So the kingdom of heaven is, in fact, a sort of shorthand way of referring to the kingdom of God. So they're the same thing. But biblically speaking, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, it's not about some far place off above the skies, mainly there for when we die.

It's the reign of God. It's a domain where God dwells and rules. And it's a realm, if we want to use that word, it's a realm separated from the realm of the earth.

[7 : 30] And we're separated because of sin. But it's still a realm that's closer than we think. God's kingdom still interacts with our earthly kingdoms and our lives, but only partially.

There's a kind of rupture. There is a divide between heaven and earth. And that divide will continue until we're told, until Jesus comes again, to renew heaven and earth, to unite them together.

And then the kingdom of God will be fully come, and God and humanity can be fully one together. And that, if you like, in a nutshell, is the future hope laid out in the Bible.

And so we now, we can enter a kingdom that is now but not yet. It's a phrase that's often used to explain this idea that God's kingdom is available to us, but it won't be in its completeness until the future when Jesus comes to bring the home of God to us.

So I just wanted to put that as a definition, because some of us may be thinking about heaven being in the skies. That's not really what is being talked about here. And so the disciples are not asking who will be greatest in heaven when we die and go to the skies.

[8 : 47] No, it's as God begins to break in and rule on earth, who's going to be at the top table? That's what they want to know. And there are three things that happen in Jesus's response to this question that I think we need to take note of as we seek to be a great church in the kingdom.

And the first is this. Jesus calls a little child and places the child among them. Now, this would have been surprising.

Children have no real place among adults in that culture. And we find, in fact, that in the next chapter of Matthew, that when people bring the little children to Jesus, the disciples resist it, presumably thinking that it was a complete waste of time.

So in this one act, Jesus is challenging the prevailing culture. He places a child among them. Now, of course, much has changed in our attitude to children since the first century.

And much of that is to do with how Christianity has helped change our values and our culture. But nevertheless, I feel that this act of placing the child among us helps us to identify one of the charisms of our church.

[10:13] Now, I know that Christchurch has long had a passion for children and youth work. We've invested in children's workers, we've invested in youth work, and we've got a whole lot going on for children and young people on Sundays and midweek, not just in this building, but in schools as well.

But here's the challenge. How many under-18s have you talked to this morning? And where are all the younger adults in their 20s and 30s?

He says, sounding like an old man at 43. There we are. Where are they? So the question I'm asking that's been stirred within me is, what would it look like here to further place the child among us?

Now, some of you are already panicking. If I start using phrases like child-centred or growing younger, your heart sinks. It feels a bit like, and I'm going to be deliberately provocative and political here, it feels a bit like I might as well be saying, America first!

Okay? The concerns of one group to the complete exclusion of everyone else. No. Let's say a big no to that. But what I am seeing is God wanting to make us to become what I'm calling increasingly intergenerational.

[11:39] Increasingly intergenerational. You see, I like to think of the church as it gathers as being a bit like one of those big family Christmas gatherings.

Now, forgive me if this isn't your experience, or hasn't been your experience, it wasn't mine, particularly as I grew up, but I'm sure you can imagine grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, a few waifs and strays thrown in, all pitching up to celebrate Christmas together.

Now, if you think about the chaos that that is, the actual time you spend together in the same room is actually fairly minimal.

You know, maybe for pulling the crackers, maybe for eating together. And when you are together, you kind of have to make it about being about the children, or else it doesn't really work.

Yes, it's a bit noisy, but also that's where the joy is. And of course, if you think about that Christmas day, other points in the day, the kids go off to play with their toys together, and the grown-ups get to spend a bit of time and quiet on their own.

[12:43] Some adults, usually me and my house, spend most of the day putting batteries into toys. Others gather around tables to do puzzles. Others go for a walk, maybe. The fact is, though, and through experience, if you try to get everyone to do the same thing at the same time, it's very hard work.

And it's never going to work, in fact. And when it comes to the washing up, though, you might say, you might have young and old rubbing shoulders together as they share stories, and as they look after the homes, they tidy up.

Now, I grant you that that's all a bit idealised. Certainly in my household, if I try to get young people to do the washing up, they run a mile. It's incredible how quickly they move. But do you see how just that picture gives a sense of what it means to be intergenerational?

What if our gatherings on Sundays and across the week felt a bit more like Christmas? Yes, a bit more mess.

Yes, a bit more noise. But yes, a lot more joy. And I'd love to see, as I see moments of it here, different generations learning from one another.

[13:58] You know, the reason why Jesus places a child in front of us is because he knows there's so much for us to learn from our children. What would it look like to serve together all ages and stages, following Jesus together?

And I really do believe this is already within the DNA of our church. If you think of things like our Transforming Lives for Goods project, that's a real model of that, that intervention work, people going in, helping children.

And I just really feel that the Lord wants to increase this gift, this charism within us. And I just, as I say, I haven't got a 20-point mega plan, but I'm just saying that I want to explore along with you what this could look like, bespoke for us here at Christchurch in this new season.

So that's the first of the calls that I sense God is making to us, is to be increasingly intergenerational. The second is to be increasingly inclusive. Let's just skip to verses 4 and 5 for a moment.

Jesus says, therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

[15:18] So Jesus is saying that childlikeness is the key to greatness in God's kingdom. Now there's always some debate about what quality of being a child, what quality is it that Jesus is inviting us to become?

Is it their innocence? Is it their openness? Is it their playfulness? Is it their dependence? And I think all of these have their place, but actually Jesus is clear about what it is about a child that makes them great in the kingdom.

And it is their lowliness. Their lowliness. He says, whoever takes the lowly position of this child. Now, as I said before, children at that time had no status.

Their only rights came through their father. And they had no political power or worldly importance. They were marginalized. They were vulnerable. And it's this humble state that Jesus says makes someone great in the kingdom.

And we are to welcome, let's call them, the lowly. So it's not just children, but all who in society feel cast to the margins, who are made to be vulnerable.

[16:39] Those are the ones we are especially to welcome. Because it's the lowly who are, if you like, the celebrities. They're the royalty in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. You know, it's like we're called to be kingdom celebrity spotters.

Okay? The vulnerable, the marginalized, the least, the lost, the lonely. They are those who we are to particularly welcome and bless those who Jesus says he blesses.

And actually, you'll see, just to kind of drive the point home, if you read on from these verses when you get home, you'll see that Jesus saves his strongest words for those who hinder what he calls the little ones, the lowly, the marginalized, from entering the kingdom.

And right after that, Matthew places the famous story of the lost sheep straight after it. And it's like he's ramming home the fact that it's the father's heart and his joy to leave the 99 to make sure the wandering little one is included and safe in his flock.

[17:57] So again, inclusivity is already within our gift here at Christchurch.

I've already met so many of you whose vocations are to work amongst the vulnerable in social care, in teaching, in care work, et cetera, et cetera. But more importantly, I've met many among us who have probably put themselves within the categories of being the least, the lost, the lonely.

And they are the celebrities of this church. So it's already part of what God's calling us to do and be, but could we make our church more accessible to those with learning difficulties, financial difficulties, physical difficulties, relationship difficulties, mental health needs, those who've experienced trauma?

Could we cater better for those who are neurodiverse? Could we include all more centrally into the life and the heart of our church community?

You bet we could. And as we do so in Jesus' name, we will be welcoming Jesus increasingly into our midst.

[19:19] And that is what the Bible defines as inclusion. Now again, there'll be some sitting here whose hearts are sinking a little bit because perhaps this has not been your experience and this all sounds to you like the vicars come here to maybe dumb things down a bit.

Let me give you an example why that is not so. How increasing accessibility and meeting additional needs can actually be a blessing to all and will be a blessing to all. Amy and I were discussing with our children's needs with their new teachers at their new school and we shared about how they really appreciate having a visual timetable, sort of drawings about what goes on in the day and where.

And it really helps them navigate the day, helps them feel sort of safe and understand what's coming up. And the teacher said yes, actually yeah, we've already got a pupil who needs that and we've put one together and we've displayed it in the classroom and actually we've found that all the other pupils really appreciate it and they benefit from it and it gives them a stronger sense of structure and rhythm.

So even in that example, what if that's a step we could take even here on a Sunday? Imagine if you're walking here for the first time, that's great if that's you, very warm welcome to you by the way

and don't we want to see more people coming in for the first time?

Oh yes. Perhaps you're not so good with words or you learn visually rather than orally. How are you expected to navigate your way for a strange and unfamiliar service?

[20 : 58] One thing we could do is to display some kind of visual cues if you like outlining the service at the beginning and as we go through the service. And if we did that I can tell you I think some more regular attenders could also get a better sense of what's going on and that probably includes me.

So there are things we can do that we think actually as we become more inclusive actually it's about mission. Do you see how becoming more inclusive is actually about mission?

It's like opening the doors wider to that big family Christmas gathering. Come in. Come in and enjoy and be able to join in with what God is doing amongst us.

So the direction God is leading us is to be increasingly intergenerational and increasingly inclusive and the last, yes of course it has to begin with an I, increasingly inspired.

Inspired. I'll tell you what I mean by that in a moment. Verse 3, Jesus says, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[22 : 11] So if you weren't already uncomfortable with Jesus' answer to becoming great already, this gets even more uncomfortable, doesn't it? Jesus says that unless we become lowly, like a little child, we ourselves will not even be part of God's kingdom.

What does he mean? Do we need to become immature? No. Do we need to stop thinking like adults? No. Do we need to give up our jobs and positions in society?

Not often. Do we need to give away our possessions? Sometimes, especially if they're becoming a hindrance to us becoming lowly. No, at its heart, to become lowly like a little child is to actually recognise that in and of ourselves, we bring nothing to God.

We have no status. In fact, little children bring, as far as I can remember, only tears, sleepless nights, and poo.

The Bible tells us we bring nothing but poo. We are dead in our sins. We are, in our fallen nature, rebels, like oversized toddlers, throwing tantrums if we don't get the thing we want, who, when we're told not to do one thing, we do exactly the opposite.

[23 : 36] And to make it worse, we just laugh at it, or cry if we end up hurting ourselves. You know, we don't deserve to be in this realm of the perfect God.

God. So, entry into the kingdom of heaven actually begins with recognizing that we are lowly. It's to take a humble position.

Our situation alone before God is actually worse than many of us want to imagine. And yet, and yet, God loves his little children, like the perfect father that he is.

He delights in his little children. He can't stop smiling at them, looking into their eyes, hugging them, kissing them, longing for his children just to be close to him.

We don't earn his love, we don't have to clean up ourselves or do good deeds. He loves us because he loves us because he loves us. And the damage that we have done in our rebellion against him, that's all been dealt with on the cross.

[24 : 47] us, just as we were singing earlier. Jesus cleans up that mess on our behalf. He's been, as it were, chastised for us. And that demonstrates just how much God loves us.

And so, if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven and to continue to experience the kingdom of heaven, there are two things that have to happen. Two things. Firstly, recognise ourselves as lonely little children.

And second, receive the unconditional love of the father. My voice dropped there. Receive the unconditional love of the father. So this is an act of our own willpower, like, come on, let's go, let's enter the kingdom.

No, it's all grace. It's the work of the Holy Spirit who convicts us of the truth about ourselves and then brings new life and love into our lives.

And so it's not so much about actually entering the kingdom of heaven, it's about the kingdom of heaven entering us. And this lies at the heart of spiritual renewal, bringing life to lost sinners, starting with us, that flows into us and out into the community.

[26 : 09] And if we do desire to be increasingly intergenerational and inclusive, spiritual renewal is essential because otherwise we won't, our desire to do that won't be there and it was going to cost us too much, it would be challenging.

It's what revival looks like, is to open our doors and see just God do his thing. It will change the atmosphere. So we need to be inspired.

And that word, I've chosen quite carefully, that word, inspired, literally means to breathe or to blow into. Spirit breathed. And of course God again has given us here, has given all his church everything we need to see this happen.

He's given us his inspired word. 2 Timothy 3 says, all scripture is, that was a pause to fill in, God breathed is what we're looking for, sorry I could have given you a bit more warning there.

All scripture is God breathed, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. And the second thing he gives us is the promise of his spirit to blow into us and transform us.

[27 : 26] Spirit and truth. If you were here for my first Sunday sermon, I talked about how this empowers true worship and leads us to Jesus. and last week I also mentioned word and spirit as it's the thing that fuels our discipleship, our apprenticing to Jesus.

Without word and spirit we cannot do those things. And of course it's God's spirit that releases among us his gifts for healing, for prophecy, etc.

etc. And it's this spirit who brings his fruit into our lives. Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And it's the work of the spirit who also releases the other childlike qualities among us. Openness, dependence upon our father, generosity, playfulness, creativity.

That's what I mean when I feel that the Lord is calling us to become increasingly inspired, blown by the spirit. And as this happens we experience the kingdom of heaven in our midst, flowing out among us.

[28 : 48] Church, is this what you want? For one person, that's amazing. it begins if we do, and I've just sprung that on you and I don't expect, specifically in our culture, for people to jump up and down, but I know that this has made some of you hungry and thirsty for this, for the Holy Spirit to blow in our midst, to be actually turning us inside out in the shape of the kingdom, upside down, like the kingdom that Jesus taught.

Spirit of God, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us here, releasing us all that you have made us to be and to become.

Thank you for those who are talking to you right now about a desire to enter your kingdom, to enter your kingdom more fully and to live out lives that Jesus wants us to.

see. And thank you, Lord, for us as a family. Thank you that you want to do great things amongst us, great kingdom things, which include love, grace, mercy, the inclusion of those who feel left out, the love of all ages and stages.

come, Holy Spirit, fill us again. Amen.