

Sermon 15 January 2022 Dreams and Visions

John 16:5-15

Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit coming to judge and to speak the truth. We have become used to the words 'judge' and 'judgment' being used in a rather negative sense, to mean 'condemn', but in those days to judge was more to do with bringing about what is justified, what is right. It was about justice.

Psalm 26, verses 1-3 sum it up nicely. *'Declare me innocent, O Lord, for I have acted with integrity; I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Put me on trial, Lord, and cross-examine me. Test my motives and affections. For I am constantly aware of your unfailing love, and I have lived according to your truth.'* This is about judgment but it also about justice.

A couple of years ago I read a book which was a novel but it was based on a true but sad story. It involved a Texan prison inmate who had been on death row for close to 30 years. He had been wrongly convicted of murdering his wife, a crime that took place while he was sleeping in a motel room two hours away. Thanks to DNA testing, it was finally proved that he was innocent. Needless to say, he was a black man and unfortunately, his case is far from an isolated one.

The statistics for wrongful sentencing in the USA make for uncomfortable reading. Since 1973 it has been proven that over 300 innocent people have been executed. That is just the proven ones – God only knows how many others there have been. It is a staggering and horrifying statistic. Since 1989 more than 18,000 defendants have been exonerated, having been initially charged and found guilty, due mainly to police officers framing them. They were innocent, and surprise, surprise, the overwhelming majority were African Americans. America has a huge problem which the majority of white Americans just don't want to know about.

So what has this to do with dreams and visions? Well, for a start, I am sure those innocent inmates dreamed of justice; they dreamed of the truth being revealed. They had visions of freedom, of being able to walk down the street and go into a café for a coffee or an ice cream, of soaking up the love and company of family and friends.

We are not inmates so our dreams will have rather a different flavour, but it is important that we do have dreams. If we don't have dreams, we are not going anywhere. If we don't have visions, we are not going to achieve much at all. One of my favourite characters in the Bible is Abraham, for a variety of reasons, but not the least being that it is never too late to start!

Abraham is in his late nineties when he has a vision. I can picture the scene. Abraham wakes up one morning, nudges his wife, Sarah, and says, 'Sarah, Sarah'. Sarah who is at least ninety-two, responds, 'What is it Abe?'

'I just had a vision,' says the old man. 'What kind of a vision, Abe?' she says. 'I just had a vision of a new world! A new people! Sarah, you and I are going to create a new nation.' 'How does this new nation start?' asks Sarah.

Abraham gives her a wink and says, 'I am glad you asked, Sarah!'

The next scene sees Abraham tottering along, arm in arm with his ninety-two-year-old pregnant wife. 'Where are you going?' people ask. 'I don't know' says Abraham. 'Well then, why are you leaving?' they yell back at him. 'Because God has given me a vision!' shouts Abraham.

And of course, the rest is history, as they say.

I repeat what I said before, if we don't have dreams, we just aren't going anywhere. If we sit back and wait for achievement, success, fulfilment, accomplishment to fall into our laps, we will be disappointed. It's just not going to happen. Yes, it comes about through hard work, sacrifice and commitment, but we have to have a very clear idea of what we are working towards, a very clear idea of what we are committed to. That's the starting point; that's the genesis.

Helen Keller, the blind and deaf woman who made history by learning to overcome her disabilities, was once asked if there was anything worse than being blind. She answered, 'Oh, yes! There is something worse than being blind. It is being able to see and not having vision.'

Finally, a most important point. God must be part of our vision. Not only do we look to God for the inspiration for our vision, but then we put that vision totally and completely in his hands. I cannot emphasise that enough. Let's go back to our Gospel reading. Jesus, in referring to the Holy Spirit, says, '*He will tell you about the future.*'

Now, I have to be a bit careful what I say here, because last year, and the year before that, and the year before that, I stood up here at this time of the year and said, 'This is a big year for our church'. I was referring, of course, to our church build. Well, I will say it yet again, with confidence and faith. And anyway, in sense, every year is a big year for our church.

Now the point I have made in the past is that this project of ours, this build began with a vision some years ago. There is no question that this vision was inspired by God. So today, we once again in faith, put that vision in God's hands. There is absolutely no way that this vision could come to fruition without constant prayer, without God's help.

The same applies to the visions and dreams we have in our personal lives. So let's ensure that we offer those dreams and visions to God.

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