

**Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 25/1/09 10.00am**  
**Epiphany 3**  
**Genesis 14:17-20; John 2:1-11**

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

This morning, I'm continuing the series of sermons inaugurated by Tim last week on the five points of the draft form of the vision statement for Holy Trinity. You'll find my text on the front of this morning's pew sheet, the second bullet point of the vision statement, which reads as follows:

*We aim to be a community which follows the way of Christ by:*

2) offering space for open minded reflection, spiritual renewal and healing, with the opportunity to learn more about the Christian faith and journey.

The very fact of this sermon series, and the consultation which has surrounded this vision statement, is one indication that this community offers space for open-minded reflection! It has been really positive to see how many people have sent comments and engaged with this statement about what we want to be which, like our knowledge of God, is something in process.

The first thing I would like to draw your attention to is a word in the preamble which Tim didn't discuss last week. He spoke of the importance of 'community' and 'following the way of Christ'. But for me the second word is also significant: "we *aim* to be a community which follows the way of Christ". We're not saying that we have it all sorted and tick every box on the list, or that we ever will. To say "we *aim*" recognises that we have our limitations, both as individuals and as a community. The point of having a vision statement is not to hold ourselves up as people who are perfect, or to create a rod for our backs when we are measured against it and found wanting. We are bound to fall short, but we believe nonetheless that it's worth trying to express our understanding of God's call to this community, because it is only by his grace that we can begin, let alone fulfil that call. This morning's reading about Jesus' turning the water into wine reminds us of the transforming power of God at work which translates into the signs of the coming of his kingdom. It's that same transforming power in our lives which gives us a vision of how this community might follow the way of Christ and be a sign of his coming kingdom.

The focus of the first of the five points of the vision statement is on worship, which is exactly as it should be: surely our first response on encountering God, like the shepherds and the magi in Bethlehem, is to fall down and worship him. But, as the title of a famous treatise by St Anselm reminds us, faith seeks understanding. If we are to offer to God all that we are, that includes our minds as well. When I was an undergraduate, I never ceased to be surprised how certain fellow students who applied themselves so industriously to the highest levels of study in their field seemed to switch off their brain when it came to religion. For some of them, religion was about doctrinal orthodoxy. You had to sign a statement saying that you agreed to x, y and z in order to be accepted: there was apparently no recognition that differing positions might be equally valid, or horror of horrors, that God might actually be so great as to transcend human attempts at definition.

Alas, that sort of thing continues to be found, even in parts of the Church of England. So to characterise ourselves as a community which offers space for open-minded reflection is to say that we do not demand adherence to a particular set of principles which express what we believe. The importance of reflection is that (when done properly and honestly) it takes into account who we are, what we are, our knowledge and experiences, and relies on these to guide us to a fuller awareness of God, using all the gifts he has given us. Our understanding of God comes through his creation, through the work of the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised to send his disciples in order to lead them into all truth. Even if God doesn't change, we do, which of course has an impact on how we discern his presence and activity. Just think how your perception of God has altered during the course of your life, perhaps beyond your wildest imagining. An open mind is essential in order to reflect on a God with whom all things are possible (Luke 1:37; Matthew 19:26).

On the other hand, we mustn't lose sight of the communal aspect of our vision statement. Reflection is not just something we do as individuals, but a process which involves the whole community. St Paul, whose conversion is celebrated

in the Christian calendar today, the twenty-fifth of January, urged the Church in Rome to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). Part of the practice of reflection is to pay attention to each other, in order to be guided to a fuller and surer knowledge of God, the Trinity in Unity, where each person points to another. This is one of the reasons why this sentence also refers to 'spiritual renewal' and 'healing', gifts of the Spirit which God ministers to us through our fellow believers.

Our fellowship, however, is not just with the other members of this congregation, but with the Church in every time and every place. "To learn more about the Christian faith and journey" is to enter into dialogue with them, through the writings and traditions available to us, which in turn lead us to reflect further on the God who has called us and to whom generations of lives bear witness. One of the most important characteristics of the Christian faith is that its basis is historical. We believe that, at a particular time and a particular place, God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death on a cross, yet rose again to a new and glorious life. What really happened? What does this mean for us? Such questions have been debated throughout the intervening centuries, yet still they remain alongside the faith which has been handed down to us by God's faithful people through the years. We continue to ask these questions, and we can benefit from the insights of our predecessors whose faith also led them to seek understanding. Nonetheless, whatever understanding we gain will never be a substitute for faith. Instead, the two feed each other, enabling us to progress along the path of the Christian journey until, as St Paul puts it, "I will know fully even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

You might be surprised that, in this section about our understanding of God, there is no mention of the Bible. The trouble is that when the Bible is mentioned in this context, it often seems to be to the exclusion of all else. Of course the Bible is a key part of Christian tradition. In fact, the New Testament is the first example of the Church's reflection on what it is to follow the way of

Christ. But what we are saying in this statement is that we want to continue this process of reflection. We don't believe that all the answers were fixed in the first two or three generations after Jesus. Instead, there is a richness to Christian tradition which is testimony to its inspiration by the Holy Spirit. We are inheritors of this tradition, and we can profit from the wisdom of every time and place, including the present day. The emphasis is, rightly, not on teaching, but on learning. My experience of teaching has been that I learn far more from it than I suspect my students do! Not for nothing did Jesus remind his followers that their only true teacher was the Father in heaven (Matthew 23:8-10).

So one of the characteristics of this community of Holy Trinity is that it wants to learn together. We want to explore the questions which we believe are important. We recognise the importance of the whole Christian tradition, and we value the gifts which God has given us to make sense of this. But we are not doing this in a vacuum, studying "the Christian faith" from a disinterested point of view. We do it because we believe it makes a difference to how we live our lives. We are a community on a journey, trying to follow the way of Christ to the best of our ability. And as we travel, like Abraham in today's Old Testament reading, let us pray that as we share bread and wine, so God may give us his blessing for all that lies ahead. **Amen.**