**Life on the Frontline 6**

**The Frontline Commitment**

**Acts 4.23-31**

In my third Life on the Frontline sermon I told the story of President Kennedy touring the NASA space centre and asking a guy with a broom what he was doing. You’ll recall that the janitor replied, “helping put a man on the moon”.

I wanted to encourage us to see that we each had a role to play; something to contribute; in building churches which supported their members to live in the world as disciples of Jesus.

Putting a man on the moon was a big dream.

What is the dream we are dreaming as churches?

For many churches these days, I fear the extent of the dream is to raise enough money to pay the bills and keep the roof watertight.

We are in survival mode.

The news coming out of the Church of England over the last few weeks has not been encouraging.

Whilst the Archbishop of York has denied any central plans to cut clergy numbers, its clear that with income down 8% last year and a 10% projected decline for this, many diocese will reduce clergy posts.

Whilst the archbishops are championing the Church of England becoming simpler, bolder and humbler I wonder what this really means?

I sometimes hear quoted that in the past, clergy often did very little ‘vicaring’. Rich incumbents would employ curates to do all the work whilst they went hunting or collected butterflies.

But I suspect such instances were less common than might be supposed…

And if clergy had time to get involved with setting up schools, charitable work with the poor, political causes for the betterment of society, oversees development and even championing the causes of science and the arts, was that such a bad thing?

Wouldn’t we want the church to be involved in these areas of national and international life, bringing its distinctively Christian perspective to bear?

One hundred years ago, most of our parishes had a church building, an incumbent priest and a school. Some had alms houses. Most would have had some means of supporting the poor of the parish financially. There was probably an organist and choir.

The vision of the church was for the whole of society – for its welfare, its education and its advancement, as well as for its spiritual and moral wellbeing.

It was a holistic vision.

I’m sure the archbishops aren’t advocating that a ‘simpler’ church retreats from these areas of public life, but I do fear this is what’s happening.

So, let me come back to my question, “What dreams are we dreaming as churches?”

Surely our dreams have to begin with those opening words of the Lord’s prayer that we looked at last week:

*“Our Father in heaven, may your name be held in honour. May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”.*

Our Life on the Frontline course has encouraged us to remember that “the earth is the Lord’s and *everything* in it.”

We’ve been reminded that God has good plans for everything he has created – not just the big stone building with a steeple and the few people who huddle together in it for warmth on a Sunday morning!

Surely our dreams must be for God to be recognised as Lord in all parts of his creation – for God’s name to be honoured.

Surely our dream must be for all aspects of society to be transformed as people freely and gladly submit to God’s good sovereign plans – for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Our dreams will be international and even cosmic, because we know God is the creator, sustainer and saviour of all things.

But they will find their focus in the locality in which God has put us, and amongst the people he has called us to live amongst. We are embodied people, living in time and space, and as the good Samaritan cared for the man in front of him, Jesus calls us to ‘do likewise’.

We ran the Life on the Frontline course to help church members reflect on the places where they engage with the world; with the people they meet there.

Dreaming dreams for the whole of society means recognising that God has plans for the places where we work, socialise, volunteer and care for family and friends. It means joining in with what God is doing – being committed, working for good and praying.

We’ve thought about how we can support each other in doing this. I’m delighted that some of the going deeper groups have set up a WhatsApp group so news can be shared and prayers offered. Fantastic!

But if for the last five weeks we’ve focused on “going out”, then we now need to recognise that there needs also to be a “coming in”.

This needs to happen in two ways.

Firstly, those of us who are Christians, who go out into the world to build God’s Kingdom, will need somewhere to come back into to be refreshed, to reflect and learn and grow, to be prayed for, and to be sent back out again.

This is the model Jesus employed with his disciples wasn’t it – sending out the twelve and then the seventy two, but then welcoming them back for more time with him.

In our reading this morning, Peter and John return to the church after healing a cripple, preaching the gospel and being imprisoned for their efforts!

And what do the church do? They pray!

Not for God to smite the religious leaders who had attacked Peter and John. Not for protection…

But for courage to get back out there and get on with the job.

The church’s prayer is a great model for us to employ as we support each other ‘out there’.

They begin with praise – for who God is and what he has done (Acts 4.24-28).

God is deserving of all praise.

But the offering of praise is also of benefit to those who offer it. It reminds us of who we serve, of his great love and power, of his ability to act. It builds our faith and courage.

The believers than pray for courage to get on with the job, in this case of sharing the Gospel.

They pray for the right words to say. People need to hear God’s word.

And they pray that God would act practically; to show his love and power in practice (Acts 4.29-30).

The result is God pouring out his Holy Spirit (Acts 4.31) and the church being empowered to speak boldly as they requested.

One image I love of church is that of a field hospital – a place for Christian soldiers to come to be patched up, refreshed and renewed, before being sent out once more into the spiritual battle.

The second “coming in” which needs to take place is that of new members.

Jesus said to “*go*” and make disciples of all nations…

…And to “baptise and teach” – which of course necessitates disciples being brought *into* the fellowship of the church where this can happen.

Some people will just turn up at church and join.

But mostly people will come because church members share their faith, show love and *invite*.

We can do this out on our frontlines…

And we can do this collectively through our church activities – by together deliberately creating opportunities.

I believe that the last year has been a time of consolidation for many of our churches. We’ve done our best to care for each other and our communities through the pandemic

And we’ve learned and grown together in person and online.

Now I’d like to encourage each church to think, as we hopefully come out of lockdown – what one thing can we do next to support church members to live for Jesus on their frontline?

And what one thing can we do together as a church to reach out to our communities with the good news of Jesus and to show his love?

Supporting church members on their frontline,

Reaching out and welcoming in,

Will involve change.

Change for change sake is bad.

Change to bring renewal and life is good.

Lets’ dare to dream big dreams – bigger even than putting a man on the moon! Let’s dream for the whole of the earth to be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

And let’s ask these exciting questions: how can we support church members to change the world out there and how can we collectively, as a church, go out and welcome in?

Let’s pray:

Sovereign God,

Who has created and saved us, who sustains us every day,

We pray that you would give us boldness to go out into the world; to share the good news of Jesus and bless our communities.

Help us to dream big, to be committed, work and pray..

And would you please stretch out your hand to heal, and perform miraculous signs and wonders,

Through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

Amen