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Athelstone Uniting Church #185

29 January 2023

Beautiful Vision

Text: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV)

*Earlier in the service we read the book, *God's Dream* by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams.¹*



The season of Epiphany is drawing to a close – a season of star gazing and wonder – a season of new insights.

We read from Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. they have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

Last week I shared an image with you – by astrophotographer @blntpencil. (not their real name). Here's another gorgeous picture of theirs..



¹ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/181250/gods-dream-by-archbishop-desmond-tutu-and-douglas-carlton-abrams-illustrated-by-leuyen-pham/>

Very similar to last week's – this time, for those who can't see it well, there is a person gazing up at the Milky Way. They are on a hill. Below them is an expanse of water – the ocean – and above them, the Milky Way, in all its splendour.

It's gorgeous, isn't it?

The other thing we did last week was to give out star words -

Like the magi, we use stars as one way we can follow Jesus. Our star words become a guiding word for the year, for our prayer and contemplation – drawing us closer to God.

If you missed out, please come and see me after the service. I have more ready – and there's one waiting just for you!

Today, our focus is on Vision – a Beautiful vision.

We heard from the prophet Micah, from Jesus and from Archbishop Desmond Tutu as they shared their vision for what the world could be...

Imagine each standing on a mountaintop – Jesus was described that way. Each have a dream they can see. A dream they want to share.

Jesus was casting a vision for a new way to see what the world can be – as we read in so many places in the Scriptures, God's kingdom is so different to the world we humans keep trying to create –

Those who were suffering would be the ones who are blessed.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted and those who are insulted.

That's certainly how what life looked like at the time. None of those people listed felt at all blessed! Yet Jesus was describing a kingdom where they would be blessed, happy.

Micah shared his prophetic words – words that we still live by today... to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

And

Desmond Tutu shared his dream in so many ways in his lifetime. The little book I read is a summary of his dream. He taught and demonstrated forgiveness and love and joy.

This week, church council met. A big part of the agenda was to update the strategic plan.

Using Micah's words, What does God require of us today?

That was effectively the question we were pondering.

We had spent time over the summer break praying about what things God is calling us to focus on as part of God's dream for Athelstone, what things we need to let go of and what things can wait for now.

We had an effective meeting as we considered these things and pondered how we can help sustain the congregation in hope as we move into a new year.

I have been pondering all these things, and over the week, a new vision has begun to emerge. This vision is both insight into what we are doing as a church – what our strengths and style are – and what we are hoping to move towards.

So today, I am going to run this past you and invite you to let me know if what I'm saying makes sense to you..

Bear with me, as I might not approach it as you would expect.. hopefully it will make sense by the end!

In the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:16-20), Jesus had another gathering on a mountaintop. According to Matthew, this happened after the events of Easter – Jesus had died on a cross, he had been buried and sealed in a cave. At dawn, some women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, had gone to the tomb, where an angel told them that Jesus was alive. Then Jesus himself appeared to the women and told them to tell the disciples to go and meet him at Galilee.

So "... the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This is how the gospel writer chose to end this Gospel – with the great commission.

The dream that I want to share with you is how I think we can, and in some ways, are, living out the great commission at Athelstone Uniting Church.

Perhaps you have heard of the adage *Believe, Behave, Belong?* or the more recent *Belong, Behave, Believe?*

These are some approaches to mission and evangelism.

The three B's of Mission:

Belong = finding your place in the body of Christ, using your gifts for worship, witness and service

Behave = learning how to be a disciple of Jesus

Believe = growing in faith in Jesus

The idea is that we help people feel a sense of *belonging*, we model how to *behave* as disciples of Christ, and eventually people might come to believe in Jesus.

It could also be that someone comes to faith (*Belief*), then goes looking for a church where they can find out more, they learn how to *behave* as a disciple, and along the way, feel a sense of *belonging*.

Perhaps a version of this is part of your story?

I have been pondering the three B's for some time – and how they work for us at Athelstone – particularly in relation to discipleship and our strategic plan.

I've realised this week that what I've been trying to do, is to develop the underlying theology about the *Why* and *How* we do what we do. While the strategic plan expands on the *What* and *When*.

So... this has led me to expand the three B's to Seven!

There were ten commandments, nine beatitudes.. I propose seven B's. They are:

Beloved. Bless. Befriend. Belong. Behave. Believe. Be.



Beloved = We are loved. Beloved people of God.

This undergirds everything that follows. It is the core of who we are as Christians.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall

not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

We see others as beloved too, and so we share this agape love unconditionally.

Bless = We express this love by blessing others as we too have been blessed. This is expressed in acts of kindness, generosity, practical care, empathetic listening and working for the common good in our local community and beyond.

Befriend = As God has befriended us in love, through Jesus, we too actively build connections and grow relationships. We share our story and show genuine interest in listening to others' stories. We value these relationships for what they are, rather than as 'means to an end'. For some people that is as far as their discipleship connection will go. 'A friend to a Christian'. Or even 'a friend of Jesus'. Not necessarily a 'believer' or a 'Christian'.

As bees spread pollen from flower to flower, so may our relationship-building be 'pollinators for the Kingdom of God.'

Belong = We demonstrate welcome and hospitality, making space for newcomers, helping them feel a sense of warmth and belonging.

We encourage use of our gifts and skills as ways of helping people feel they are both part of our community and part of God's story.

We baptise infants and adults, welcoming them into the family of God.

Behave = We teach and demonstrate Christian values and behaviour, markers of the followers of Jesus (disciples). We encourage use of our gifts in ministry: including worship, sharing love, serving, caring for people and our earth, advocating, being generous and creative, and so on.

Believe = We encourage one another on our spiritual journeys as we grow in faith and love of Jesus. We provide safe spaces and make ourselves available to learn and to ask questions that will help us grow in faith and understanding. We respect that we are all different and delight in learning from one another, even when sometimes it can make us feel uncomfortable!

Be = We encourage each other to spend time being loved and nurtured in the company of God. In silence. In prayer. With music. In nature. By the beach. Appreciating beauty. Gazing into the eyes of a precious newborn.

The seven B's:

Beloved. Bless. Befriend. Belong. Behave. Believe. Be.



Oh, and why the Bee?

Because of the alliteration of all those B words! And..

The way bees spread the pollen – in such an easy and natural way – as they buzz from flower to flower.

What do you think? Does this make sense? Does this describe for you what you feel God is up to through our congregation as we respond to Jesus' great commission? Is this a vision that inspires you?

Is it a vision that can capture the values that Micah, Tutu and Jesus spoke about?

I look forward to hearing your feedback, so that we can develop this further as the underlying framework for *Why* we do what we feel God is calling us to do. ..always in response to God's amazing love for us.

Is it a beautiful vision?

God willing, may it be so!

Amen