

**Final sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts
on the results of the Second 8 Essential Qualities survey**

Advent 4 2016

The Diocesan initiative of the 8 Essential Qualities is being overseen in St Mary's by our Church Council and its Standing Committee. Our latest survey carried out earlier this year, identified 'Need-Oriented Outreach' as our least healthy category so I've been asked to address this in a series of sermons during Advent. Thus far, we've looked at what outreach, mission and evangelism are; the questions in this part of the survey which produced our lowest rankings; those questions under this heading which produced our best responses and in this final sermon we shall look at the way forward.

If you heard the first in this series or picked up a copy in church or online you may recall the story I told about Paganini's prized violin being stolen and how he used the battered, second-hand instrument left in its place to make the music that was in his soul for his surprised but appreciative audience. I suggested that *our* 'mission' is likewise: to walk out on the stage of our world and reveal that the music of our faith isn't in externals or things but in the music of God's grace that's in *our* souls.

As well as being a parable about how we might approach evangelism and outreach, that *story* of Paganini and his violin also provides another crucial clue about how mission works. Let me explain.

In her book outlining what she calls a *new* approach to Christian mission, Ann Morisy argues that the *stories* we tell have a key role in outreach. She illustrates the power of story with an account of how some years ago a Mothers' Union group in Kent was visited by three Mothers' Union members from Zimbabwe. In their presentation they spoke of how important hand sewing machines were to villages in Zimbabwe where there was no electricity. The word went round and soon there were eight old sewing machines retrieved from people's lofts. However, the Zimbabwean women advised the only way those machines could reliably reach the villages was if they were delivered personally. As a result a group of British women all over 60 ended up going out to Africa to deliver a batch of sewing machines to Mothers' Union members in Zimbabwe.

Morisy describes how this act not only had a profound impact upon villages in Africa but the story *also* had a deep effect on the churches and community in Kent. The women and their wider families were transformed by the story of this experience. So Morisy observes how: 'Stories are so much part of our lives that their significance is easily overlooked' and 'often the impact of stories remains invisible and unacknowledged' (*Journeying Out*, 2004, p 67).

We can see this in our own experience. If we stay with music for a moment – those of us that sing (say) will have a story about how we started singing. Perhaps someone encouraged that gift in us so we sang at school or joined a choir. And then we met friends, encountered others who inspired our singing, shared the journey and that's why we do it now. If we don't sing but have a love of music, there'll be a similar story about that first piece of music or that song which captured our hearts. There'll be those moments when we came across favourite pieces or standout tracks. Not only will there be a story *about* the music but those stories will be *woven* into our own life stories and be part of what makes each of us unique. A striking example occurred this year with the

death of David Bowie as, across the generations, people shared their accounts of how much his music meant to them.

The same is true of faith. Each of us has a unique story about that aspect of our life-journey and the people who shaped it, fed it and nurtured it. It may or may not include a vivid encounter with Jesus. It may or may not feel like a steady walk, a series of sprints or a constant struggle. However *our* faith and *our* relationship with God works, it will be *our* story with God. So when it comes to churches, not only are we bringing that marvellous variety of storytelling together in a process of story-sharing, we're also writing a communal story together, which itself is being fashioned by the story of God's love, God's grace and God's sacrifice for us.

As people of faith we need to be aware of our own story and how it relates to God's story – so if someone asks us: *How does Christian faith work for you?* we can give an honest account of its strengths and its struggles. Of course, we shouldn't expect our story to be their story. God relates to us in different ways and will enable all of us to write those stories in a variety of forms.

The same is true for congregations and churches – and there's an example of this close to home. A few years ago when Roger Garratt retired as a vicar in the Warwick Team, we were asked by the Bishop of Coventry to review the Team Ministry before a successor to Roger could be appointed at St Nicholas. The way in which we undertook that review was to listen, record and reflect upon the stories of the different churches in our Team.

It's fair to say some were disappointed the review didn't lead to a series of SMART action points with goals that were: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. I'd argue that what our storied-review produced was something much *less* tangible but much *more* important: it created trust. Trust is a close cousin to faith and hope but even more fragile. There's a lovely proverb, which I think is Dutch, that goes: Trust arrives on foot but leaves on horseback. In other words, it takes a long time to build trust but can be lost in an instant. And that can be a very serious problem, because trust oils the cogs in any organization. Communities cannot function without it.

Much has changed since that review – some things for the better and some for the worse. I'd argue that as the Warwick Team we've been able to weather storms and steer a positive course because of the trust we engendered through sharing our stories together. One of those developments has been the creation of the Project Pool, which uses some funding from the King Henry VIII Endowed Trust for specific developments in the Team churches. We've seen it spent in St Mary's – the changes to our facilities at the west end and the Shakespeare 400 events are just two examples. And we're using some of the Project Pool funding to work with two further Diocesan initiatives *Together for Change* and *Acceler8*. *TfC* will work with us in creating a post to serve areas of need across the Team and with *Acceler8* we're creating a position that works with those in the 20-30s age group.

Both roles will have a positive impact upon the category of 'Need-Oriented Evangelism' in the 8 Essential Qualities. But ... they're not the only solutions to the challenges under this heading. When filled in 2017 these posts *will* contribute to the **story** that we're writing here and now with God in Warwick. ... But they're no *more* important and no *less* important than our individual and collective stories – your story, my story, St Mary's story are all *vital* to God's story in this place and this time.