

Vision 1: What is vision? (1 Samuel 3:1-11, Mark 8:21-30)

This week saw the big farewell and last major public speech of outgoing US President Barack Obama. In front of 18,000 supporters, one of the great political orators of our generation gave an emotional farewell and a brief assessment of what he had achieved in office. His status as the first black US president is likely to mean that, however you rate his legacy, his time in office is likely to be called the Obama era.

Despite that, opinions tend to polarise depending on which side of the political divide you sit, and also your assessment of what someone might expect to achieve given that he spent 7 of his 8 years presiding over minorities in Congress, which stifled much of what Obama wanted to do. Some have criticised him for just being too nice, too driven by consensus politics, such that, for all his rhetoric, his legacy could be overturned within a matter of months under the new regime. Others have praised what he managed to do *despite* a Democratic minority, suggesting that with more favourable conditions he could have been one of the greatest of all presidents.

Nevertheless, whatever you think of him, listening to him one last time this week would only have confirmed what nearly all people agree on: Obama was a man of great vision. Whether it was racial harmony or gun control, climate change or bilateral agreements with overseas nations, Obama had a compelling vision of what a just and peaceful society might look like. He may have failed to achieve as much change as he wanted, but the extraordinary press conference given by his successor the following day did rather reinforce the extent of the change the US people are going to have to live with from now on – though we need to be careful to suspend judgement for now.

Vision is the oxygen of all great leaders. In a sense, it is what separates the good from the average, and the great from the good. The word vision literally means ‘sight’ – great leaders *see* things, and are able to conjure up inspiring words from what they see.

But vision is not just confined to leaders. On one level, it’s not a question of *whether* you have vision: but rather *what* vision you have. If you have the gift of sight, you will be seeing something all the time you are awake – it just depends on where you are looking. Down at your feet, just at the screen in front of you, or all around at the whole landscape. True vision is like the latter isn’t it – it reminds me of what John Robertson shared with us almost exactly a year ago. Do you remember his points - vision:

Opens our eyes (S) – we start seeing things, perhaps for the first time

Lifts our horizons (S) – we stop looking at our feet or the next thing in front of us, and like Psalmist ‘lift our eyes to the hills’, to what *could* be, to the bigger picture of what God is up to

Invites our commitment (S) – not just words – any vision worth its salt must translate into action. This is why analysis of Obama’s legacy is mixed. There were some extraordinary achievements, things that many commentators thought were impossible: the Paris agreement on climate change, the Affordable Care Act, the deal with Iran.

But other things didn't happen: the trade deals, and most notably the gun control legislation which Obama described as his greatest regret. Vision talks: but it doesn't just talk: it *acts*. A compelling vision changes our hearts and leads us to action – or it's just hot air, rising into the sky.

Here in Walton Churches Partnership , we have a vision. It's something we first drafted in the middle of 2015. A team of us representing every church went away for the day and spent time in the Scriptures – especially John's gospel – praying, sharing and reflecting together on who we were and what God was calling us to do. It was a significant day, and from it we came up with this summary of what it is we want to be **(S)**:

Seeking, sharing and celebrating the abundant life of God

Over the next few weeks we'll be looking in detail at each part of this phrase:

- What is the abundant life of God? In other words, when Jesus calls us to fullness of life, what does he mean by that?
- Once we've got our heads round that, we'll spend the next 3 weeks on each of those first 3 words: what does it mean to seek this abundant life of God for ourselves?
- What does it mean to share this abundant life with others?
- And how will we be known as a community which celebrates it too? What would a culture of celebration look like?
- For our last Sunday, we'll draw the strands together, thinking what it might look like to start living this vision out. What are we doing well already? Where could we grow and change?

It doesn't end there, by the way. Off the back of the vision series, we have 3 open meetings scheduled across the Partnership, the first at the end of January (31st) to begin this process (fliers next week). We want vision to become action! Maybe not straightaway, but we've got to start somewhere.

And along the way, I hope we'll have the courage and humility to grapple with these big ideas, and ultimately to own this vision ourselves. We want people to be inspired, to take it to heart and to let it open our eyes, lift our horizons and invite our commitment. If MK is going to be A City Alive to God, it needs communities to know what God's abundant life is, and to be active in seeking, sharing and celebrating it. That's what we're about.

But before we get into the meat next week, I just want to share for a few minutes with what's left of my time this morning to go back to our passages and make 2 simple points. The first is this:

Vision is Given by God (S). That's one of the things we learn from our story in Samuel. God speaks, and we need to be people who listen to him. Samuel was so surprised he didn't realise who it was at first, did he? He kept going to Eli – and Eli to his credit works it out first. He gives Samuel some of the most profound advice any of us can ever receive **(S)**: 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.' For a vision to be given by God we must be attentive to God first. We need to listen. We received what became our vision because the leadership team went away and listened.

We believe in a God who speaks – but it's one thing to know that, and quite another to listen. That's why we give such a high priority to the bible and to prayer. We can't know God's will without the first, and we don't learn to listen without the second. I want to be very clear at the start of the series, that all this stuff on vision is not just a self-help strategy or some sort of marketing pep talk. We want to listen to God, to be inspired and empowered by him. We believe we've heard something about the direction God wants us to go, the people he wants us to be. What a few of us have heard we now want the rest of the churches to hear. Or to use the words of our first hymn: 'He speaks, and listening to his voice: new life the dead receive, the mournful broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.' May God grant us grace to listen over these next few weeks and months, that God may capture our hearts with this vision.

Second, vision always recognises Jesus for who he is (S). Our vision might not say the word 'Jesus', but the abundant life at its heart is exactly what Jesus is talking about in John 10 and elsewhere. Abundant life is only found in Jesus: he is not just the way and the truth, but also the Life.

When Peter talks with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, his great breakthrough is to recognise Jesus for who he was: the Christ, the Anointed One, the special God-sent person that his people were waiting for. But he only had half the picture didn't he? Jesus went on to share more openly what being who he was would mean, and Peter couldn't stomach it. How could his special status lead to such service and suffering?

It's hard to maintain a rounded view of Jesus – we tend to prefer the soundbites or the single issue summaries. But I make no apologies for pursuing 3 dimensions in our vision (S): to seek, to share *and* to celebrate. We want to be hungry for Jesus, naturally outward looking to others and committed to celebrating all that comes from it. Ultimately we want to see Jesus for who he is: and if we do that, then it's going to be exciting.

So let's use these next few weeks to be inspired. Let's reflect deeply on this vision, both as individuals and together, let's pray, let's resolve to act – and, to God's glory, may we be a community known for:

Seeking, sharing and celebrating the abundant life of God

Amen.