

How good it is to be with you today in what will go down in the history of this church as a demonstration for freedom for the community we serve.

Two thousand years ago, a great Jewish carpenter, in whose shadow we stand, stood in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour. Proclaimed the Spirit of the Lord brings reconciliation, sustaining, guiding, and healing. People would be established in relationships of love with God and each other. People would be helped to endure and transcend the vagaries of life and its seasons. People would be assisted with the business of living well. People would be restored to wholeness. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of light, shining in the darkness. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But two thousand years later, we must face the tragic fact that people are still not free. Two thousand years later, the life of our communities are still sadly crippled by the manacles of consumerism and the chains of discrimination. Two thousand years later, people live on lonely islands of poverty, both material and spiritual, in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity and secularism.

And so we've come here today because the joy of the Lord is our strength. In a sense we've come to cash a cheque. When Jesus, the architect of our new society - the church, proclaimed those magnificent words of the Lord's favour, he signed a promissory note to which we are all heirs. This note was a promise that all men and women would be guaranteed life, and have it abundantly.

It is obvious today that large swaths of our country have turned away from this promissory note. Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, they have given countless people a different and bad cheque which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of God gifted creativity in our communities. So we've come to cash our cheque - claim our inheritance in faith - and demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice for the communities we serve.

We have also come today to remind ourselves of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage primarily in the luxury of our Sunday worship or to take the tranquilising drug of church maintenance. To let our fears and weaknesses paralyse our creation of an authentic Christian community. Now is the time to lift our communities from the quicksands of denial to the solid rock of relationships marked by reconciliation, healing, guiding, and sustaining. Now is the time to make the Lord's favour a reality for all of God's children.

The whirlwinds of the Holy Spirit's revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our community until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to you, whose care I am entrusted with: Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom in a way in which sets different parts of our community against one another or apart from the communities we seek to serve. The diversity of our community and bonds of friendship with the wider community reveal to us that our freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of others. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of reading from the teaching of God, with interpretation. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force, apathy, and false teaching with soul force; reconciliation, healing, sustaining, and guiding.

Vision Sunday Address, 24 Jan 2016, Stefan Collier

There are those who are asking us: "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as our children, sometimes as young as five, are self harming and suffering from stress related anxiety in the world which we have created for them. We cannot be satisfied knowing as our society ages, [with the number of people over 65 expected to rise by nearly a third in the next 20 years], increasingly large numbers are suffering from isolation and loneliness. We can never be satisfied as family life disintegrates, [with a 22% increase in lone parents above the 17% rise nationally], contributing to undermining the cohesion of communities. We cannot be satisfied when economic inequality in our borough inhibits reconciliation between people, drives people to commit suicide, and holds people captivity. No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until the Lord's favour rolls down like waters and what is right like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that you have come here today with particular histories, joys, frustrations and motives. Let us not be determined solely by these. I say to you today, my beloved friends, that in spite of a journey through a leaking spire, a large financial deficit, and continuing struggle for volunteers, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in simply sharing the ministry of Jesus Christ. Proclaiming and embodying the Spirit of the Lord brings reconciliation, sustaining, guiding, and healing.

I have a dream that one day this church will provide a full time employee to be a catalyst for change in the way in which we relate to and serve our parish school and young people communities; to raise twenty five thousand pounds for this purpose. [For, in time for its thanksgiving service on 7 February, six new givers to give £12.50 per week and all its current givers to increase their giving by around £2 per week.] Thereby, to help contextualise the proclamation of the Lord's favour in our school communities, release our children from stress and contribute to the positive development of family life.

I have a dream that one day this church community will be renown as a Holy place; a thin place where God's presence is especially known and experienced in a life affirming and transforming way. A place equipped and rooted in learning through the facilities it offers and how it simply is. Learning which motivates and transforms our worship, engages with our wider community, and helps us with the business of living well.

I have a dream that one day this church will help people to discover God and therefore themselves; as beloved sons and daughters of God; free, loved, and empowered by God's Holy Spirit to live in community with each other and in alignment with their God gifted purpose in life. To help people desire with their whole hearts an ongoing reconciliation with God and each other and deep joyful, unprompted, and easy sharing of a common life which provides the foundation for life's which embody the Lord's favour. The Lord's favour which guides, sustains, and heals, and serves as golden nectar for those outside of our community.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day our church, in one of the richest boroughs of the country, will be able to finance its dream, for it cannot currently, through all its members, young and old alike sharing responsibility, making their financial support a priority, planned, proportionate to their income - working towards 5% in line with the national Church's guidance, and an act of sacrifice which impacts their lifestyle and dares to trust God's provision for them; making their support a vital response to the abundance of God's blessings continually poured out upon them.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

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This is our hope. This is the faith that I will leave this place with. With this faith we will be able to throw off the manacles of consumerism and the chains of discrimination. To connect the islands of poverty, both material and spiritual, by pushing aside the vast oceans of material prosperity and secularism.

With this faith we will be able to transform the deafening noises of our communities into a beautiful symphony of stillness and community. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to become poor together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we are becoming free.

This will be the day, when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts."

And so let us walk about in freedom in the streets of Esher.

Let us walk about in freedom on the greens of West End.

And when this happens, when we allow ourselves to walk about in freedom in our communities, homes, and workplaces, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children will be able to join hands and sing "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

*Amen. And with grateful thanks to Martin Luther King.*

*Postscript*

*In preparing to preach I was struck by Martin Luther King's famous speech given on 28 August 1963, calling for an end to racism in the United States of America on the steps of the Lincoln memorial; a defining moment of the American civil rights movement. It occurred to me that Jesus' speech, which defines our parish mission and the mission of God's church, was a similarly defining moment in the history of humankind. I was inspired to take King's speech - it's incredible composition and frame - as the structure, style, and frame for my address on Vision Sunday. To communicate something of the magnitude of what we are called to be and do as a church community. Namely, participate in social revolution not unlike that of the American civil rights movement. To end racism, but understood in far broader terms - a denial of the oneness of humankind. Hence, my address deliberately follows King's speech as closely as possible, but simply changed for our context. In doing this, no offence or error is intended, rather that God is glorified.*