

READINGS: I Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

This week we have had some happy news and some sad news – The happy news is that Bishop Philip has a new job: the sad news is that it is in Sheffield, and so he will be leaving us.

Bishop Philip has said that there is a number that keeps him awake at night, and that number is '92' – are rather '92%'. 92% is the number of people in this country who do not go to church – this means that we are just the 8% that do. That is not to say that Bishop Philip doesn't care about the 8% - no – but we don't keep him awake like that big number – 92%.

That is a massive number and one which might make us think 'it's impossible' – why bother? – which for too long has been the mindset of many in the Church. Buildings have been closed, small congregations have been combined. We have been in retreat.

Our Diocesan vision is working to change that mindset and also our churches:

- Being healthy churches, transforming communities.
- How we view ourselves
- How we operate
- How we view the community

Is about changing the mindset of the Church and our role as a Church.

In many ways St Stephen's has already started responding a few years ago.

- Doing Mission Action Planning
- Taking part in Diocesan initiatives

And in some ways we have begun to respond

- Wake Up and Worship
- Feed Me Friday
- Fledglings

And we are making more contact between Church and School, and the Community.

But I'm not saying 'Relax', rather I'm saying – let's keep going, moving forward – but with an added ingredient.

For the 92% may seem enormous and unattainable, but it isn't beyond our ability if we remember 'how big is God compared to us?'

If we allow the 92% to dominate our thinking, we won't have space to see God, rather, we need to see how big God is and recognise how, with his help and the Holy Spirit, the work is his and not ours. The 92% is nothing, for 'with God, all things are possible'. It's all about perspective.

What dominates our sight – the insurmountable job or the glory of God – his forgiveness and love; his mercy and compassion; his healing and renewal.

If our view is heaven and God's character, then the 92% will be so small by comparison.

We need to remember – the work is God's. He has all the resources we need. We just need to be willing workers for his work.

Now our response isn't all activism – be active, be busy, wear ourselves out –  
Rather by stillness, awareness, devotion, attentiveness, our prayer life.

Our response has to start by:

- Being still in prayer, not busy praying
- Being aware of God in our midst, not chatting or with the TV on
- Being devoted to Jesus, not our latest magazine or book or ipad.
- Being attentive to the still small voice of God saying – 'You are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.'

Imagine if we could hear God say that to us – how transforming it would be.

If we were still enough to hear God's voice rather than the voice of our busy lives.

I'm sure for many of us that to hear those words would be encouraging.

But that is how God does view us –

- Us who are in relationship with God
- Us who have received God's mercy and love

And if we hear and receive those words, our view of others will be transformed. Knowing we are loved by God, will transform our minds and our world view, that God is bigger than our problems and God loves us so much that love compels us to respond.

So our activity is not out of churchy duty, but rather out of our response to God's love for us.

We don't do this work with our human limited strength

We do this work in God's strength – unlimited resources.

It's our perspective that needs to change.

So as the 8% we are empowered, for God is on our side.

God is for us, to make possible the impossible.

God is giving us gifts to make a difference – and it all starts in prayer.

Whatever we pray, let us try to make time

- To be still and know God
- To be aware of his presence
- To be devoted to Jesus, and his love for us
- And be attentive to his small voice, speaking to us.

Too often I don't think God has a look in – our world is so noisy and our lives are so busy – our minds so pre-occupied with stuff. Praying like being a disciple isn't a sprint event – a 100m dash. Prayer is a marathon of running the race, of living a life determined to be closer to Jesus than we were yesterday.

For me in January, I set off at a pace, doing stuff with new vigour and focus, that I lost sight of God, and as a consequence got even more tired and weary, also additional problems became insurmountable – on top of which the world news began to dominate my thinking. My perspective was all wrong. I was doing all the right stuff in the wrong way.

So while I want to encourage you in your prayer lives, I'm also teaching myself – I need to change my perspective of who I am in God and what my priorities are for living – making time for God every day – working at being still, being quiet, being attentive to hear God's voice.

This came home to me when I sang for the second time in a week one of my favourite hymns – *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*.

The hymn called me back, reminded me what I'd lost sight of, its poetic words echoing and saying 'come back and focus your life on God – get things in perspective, and then everything else will begin to fall into place'. God first, Activity second.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
forgive our foolish ways!  
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,  
in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence, praise;  
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,  
beside the Syrian sea,  
the gracious calling of the Lord,  
let us, like them, without a word,  
rise up and follow thee;  
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!  
O calm of hills above,  
where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
the silence of eternity  
interpreted by love!  
interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness,  
till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress,  
and let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of thy peace;  
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire  
thy coolness and thy balm;  
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm;  
O still, small voice of calm.

Now friends, that is the introduction to today's sermon. It's an introduction that sets our agenda for living, an introduction that re-focuses our pre-occupation from activity to stillness in God.

We have ahead of us big projects. Yes we have the 92% of unchurched people, we have the task of being healthy churches transforming communities, we also have the work to rewire and decorate our building. As you will have read in the magazine, the Churchwardens and PCC are pre-occupied with this. But it will help if we all work together, not only in activity, but above all in prayer – as I have stressed this morning – prayer that God is bigger than our task, and God has more resources than we can ask or imagine.

Today's Gospel calls us to be salt and light. Salt that transforms taste. If we aren't in God in prayer, we will lose our taste and become bland.

Salt *preserves* meat – a little salt goes a long way – we need to make time to be close to God so his salt is in us to share with others.

Salt *heals* wounds – our closeness to God, our knowledge that God loves us, forgives us, will heal others' hurts.

Salt is important and if we lose sight of our Heavenly Father, then we lose our saltiness, and all our activity is just busyness, achieving nothing, but wearing ourselves out.

We talk about the light of the world - we are told in Matthew 5:14 'We are the light'. We carry the light of Christ in us – in our actions, our words, our thoughts – We need to realise that we carry the light, not only for ourselves to know where we're going, but also to light the path for others to find God's love, healing, forgiveness, and we carry that light in our lives – and it is kindled and fired up by our lives being in God. So our prayer lives fire our light of God in us. So our actions, words, thoughts are reflecting God's glory – So let your light Shine.