

Date: 31.1.21
 Text: Romans 15
 Title: Our Ambition
 Place: Swansea/Charlestown AM
 File: Vision 2021
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We have just finished celebrating Australia Day and one of the key components in our national history is the arrival of Captain Cook at Botany Bay. Way back in 1768, the 39 year old British sea captain, set out on a journey of scientific discovery. In his journal he wrote these words *"I had the ambition not only to go further than any man had been before but as far as it was possible for man to go."*

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Now that's ambition, isn't it? To go as far as it was possible for a man to go. Well, the apostle Paul also had a huge ambition as well. He says in Romans 15:20 *"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so I wouldn't be building on someone else's foundation."* Imagine that? To make sure everyone in the whole world knew about Jesus Christ. Everyone. As one person has said "Paul tried to do in 20 years what the whole Christian Church hasn't done in 200 years!"

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So as we start a new year can I ask you what your ambition is? What are your hopes and dreams for 2021? To just survive another year? To stay safe? To look after your family? To stabilise your career? To get good marks at school or uni? Or do you think that God has something more ambitious for you? And for us as a Church?

Well today is our vision Sunday. And I want to paint for you a picture of God's mission for us from Romans 15. It's a big picture. It's a massive vision. Its ambitious. But I think it is what God wants to place before us today. For this last year has meant we have had to turn inward. To protect ourselves and our family and even our Church we have needed to spend most of our time thinking about our own needs. And if we continue to do that it will be dangerous for our spiritual health because the Christian life is not about us. It is about God.

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So, lets for a few moments push our own agenda out of the way in order to see what God's agenda is. Let's open ourselves up to the word and the Spirit as they speak into our lives. Let's be ambitious. Or in the words of Francis Xavier, the founder of the Jesuits, let us *"Give up (y)our small ambitions, come with me and save the world"*. And it all begins with

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1. Proclamation (verses 14-16)

*¹⁴"I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. ¹⁵Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty **of proclaiming the gospel of God**, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit"*.

First and foremost Paul tells us we need to proclaim the gospel of God. We need to preach Jesus. We need to tell the world not just about History but His Story. A story of God's grace overcoming our sin. A story of God's love defeating mankind's hate. A story of mercy, a

story of Jesus Christ.

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That is why Paul goes on to say in verse 20, ²⁰*"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known."* That's Paul's ambition. To preach the gospel, to proclaim Christ. And he does that both inside and outside the Church. For he proclaims the gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Those who were once far away from God, now have been changed by God. Transformed. They now offer themselves as living sacrifices. This offering is not a dead animal like it was in the OT, it is a live person. Body, mind and spirit all given up to God. That's the power of the gospel. That's how God converts and sanctifies those who were once non-Christians. Through the proclamation of the gospel. Through preaching and teaching God's word.

It turns sinners into saints. In fact, it is the only way that God turns sinners into saints. So we can't afford not to preach the good news to all. For it is God's chosen method to change the world. So we cannot say to ourselves that this year I am going to keep myself safe, I am going to build myself a nest egg, I am going to spend more time with my family. They might all be good things but God wants us to be more ambitious.

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God wants us to get a vision of what He wants to do through us in this world & part of that is to proclaim the gospel where Christ is not known. But it is not just conversion it is transformation. So, this same proclamation changes others but it also changes us. As well. ¹⁴*"I myself am convinced, my brothers & sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge & competent to instruct one another."*

God's word fills us with goodness because one of the fruits of the Spirit of God is goodness. It gives us a knowledge of God and how to live a God directed life. And it is the content we need to instruct one another, to admonish one another, to encourage one another. That's a picture of a healthy Christian. They know the truth. They are living in the light of the truth & they are sharing that truth with others so that they might be healthy in their faith as well.

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So what God is saying to us today through the apostle Paul is that we need to put proclaiming God's gospel on the agenda for 2021. You and I need to keep hearing it. You and I need to keep being changed by it. You and I need to keep sharing it with others.

So how do we do that? Well, we need to prioritise God's word. Hearing it, reflecting on it, living by it. We need the help of God's Holy Spirit to open ourselves to being changed by it. And we need to do whatever we can to support this sort of proclamation in our families, in our churches, and throughout our world. That can be the first part of our vision for 2021.

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2. Praise (verses 17-18, 5-13)

But the proclamation of God's gospel should lead secondly to the praise of God's glory. That is why the Gentiles have become an offering acceptable to God. For that's what an offering does. It is to glorify the one it is offered to. So, Paul continues in verse 17, ***"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God."*** ¹⁸*I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God..."*

Our service to God, our proclamation of God's gospel is not done because it makes us feel good. It is not even done so that we might be saved and sanctified. It is for God's glory. It is for His praise. It is not about me or them it is all about HIM.

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And if you are not convinced about that, let me take you back to the start of Romans 15.
⁷"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, **in order to bring praise to God.**"

*"For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, **that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**"* Slide 11 As it is written:

*"Therefore **I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name.**"*

¹⁰ Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "**Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him.**"

Paul is piling up the number of OT quotations to show us that this is the aim of gospel proclamation. To praise God. He quotes the law, the prophets and the Psalms, to show that this is not just a minor issue in the OT, it is central. The gospel needs to go out. The word of God needs to change us. For that is what ultimately glorifies God's name.

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So, in the OT one way to praise God was to offer up a sacrifice as an act of worship, but now we offer ourselves up as living sacrifices as acts of worship. And we offer others up as well. Those who were once far away from God can now bring forth their praises to God. So, praise happens in both worship and in evangelism.

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In the words of John Stott, *"It is when we worship God, glorying in his holy name, that we are driven out to proclaim his name to the world. And when through our witness people are brought to Christ, we then offer them to God. Rather they themselves join in his worship, until they too go out to witness. Thus, worship leads to witness and witness leads to worship. It is a perpetual cycle."*

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So what God is saying to us today is that we need to put praising God's name on the agenda for 2021. In worship both private & public. And in our witness as well. Not being ashamed of what God has done but announcing it, trumpeting it to those around us. In the hope that God will also bring them to Christ and that will lead them to more people praising God's name. But it doesn't stop there. Proclaiming, praising and

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3. Pioneering (verses 19-22)

"So, from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation."

Star Trek fans would say that Paul would boldly go where no one has been before. For Paul's aim, his ambition is to reach the unreached for Christ. It was to church the unchurched for God's glory. So, starting in Jerusalem, Paul went to Antioch, then northwards around the western side of the Mediterranean. And at each spot he would proclaim Christ to those who

had never heard of Christ. Mainly he would do that in the cities. He would stay for a while, set up a Church, appoint leaders and then move on allowing the Churches he had just planted to plant others Churches in the regions beyond.

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It's a bit like growing strawberry plants. You see when you grow strawberry plants after a while it will shoot out a runner. And the runner takes root. And then that one shoots out another runner. With the hope that each of them bears fruit. Which is terrific if you like strawberries. And even more terrific if you like the sound of fruitful churches. So, Paul has been planting Churches and then leaving them with the gospel to proclaim and spread it further. Until one day it came to us here in Newcastle. Before it goes from us further afield.

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Where did Paul get this idea from? The OT of course so he quotes from Isaiah 52. *"As it is written "Those who were not told about him will see & those who have not heard will understand."* So, it is not just Paul's idea it is God's idea. Its not Paul's ambition but God's ambition. To ensure that the gospel boldly goes where no one has been before & to ensure that those who were not told about Jesus might hear the truth about the gospel of Jesus.

When David Livingstone was interviewed about where he wanted to go as a missionary he said "Anywhere as long as it is forward." When he arrived in Africa he wrote back to his friends saying he was "haunted by the smoke of a thousand villages" before him. But it is no different today. There are countries in our world today where there is no gospel witness. There are over 8 million Muslims in Europe alone unevangelised. And here in Australia there are millions of people who don't know a Christian at all.

So we need to keep reaching out, not closing the doors within. Yes, I know that the Coronavirus makes it more dangerous to do so, but it is far more dangerous for us and others if we fail to call people from hell to heaven. And being a pioneer doesn't just mean going overseas, even though we should be willing to send our best and brightest where the needs are greatest. But it means making plans, each of us making our plans to see how we can reach out to those who currently don't know Jesus.

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Here is how three members of our fellowship have done it in recent years. One has sought to use the changes in climate to talk to others about how God has given us a mandate to better look after his creation. Another has found herself in brothels talking to prostitutes about how much God loves them. And a third has talked to me about wanting to reach migrants by teaching them English and using the Bible as their text book. I am sure if we all put our minds to it, we would find even more ways of doing such pioneering work.

As David Jones has said *"it is a sad commentary on today's Church that those of us who call ourselves evangelicals are often not evangelistic and those who are evangelistic are often not evangelicals."* So what God is saying to us today is we need to look at the mission field before us. Jesus says I will build my Church. It will happen! But he also invites us to join him in his work. Today he has placed before us a vision of proclaiming, praising, pioneering and

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4. Partnering (verses 23-29)

²³ *But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you*

while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.”

Paul is saying the job is too big for just one person. Or even a handful of people. We all must be involved. So, he is heading off to Spain but before he does that he is going to stop in with his readers for a Roman holiday. Well not really a holiday where he can tour the Coliseum and enjoy a drink or two in an outdoor café. Instead, he wants to illicit their support. To recruit a team of workers and supporters. He wants to build a base to evangelise Spain.

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But before he even gets to Rome, he has something even more important to do. I wonder what is even more important than evangelising the lost? Well, you might find this surprising but it is caring for the poor. ²⁵ *“Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord’s people there. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem.”*

Paul the great evangelist has enlisted his newly planted Churches to help to reach out to the Jews caught up in a deadly famine in Jerusalem. So, he postpones his longed for visit to Rome to express his unity with those who were doing it tough, very tough. Because Paul’s vision is not just someone’s salvation but their transformation. And what better way to show the world that the gospel is powerful than to bring Jew and Gentile together, rich and poor together, those from Asia and those from the Middle East together as one.

The old chorus goes they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. And so, Paul says if we are unified together, if we partner together not only does that help us to pool our resources to preach the gospel but it is a model of what the gospel does to people that will further emphasis the power of God. You see it is not just about our justification that God cares about but our sanctification but nothing happens on either front without God’s power.

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But Paul then goes one step further. ²⁷ *“They were pleased to do it, **and indeed they owe it to them.** For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”* You get that? Those who are saved have rewards and responsibilities.

They are in debt to God who has given them this salvation by grace. They are also in debt to the Jews because they now share their Scriptures, their promises, their covenants, their Messiah, their relationship with God. And they are in debt to others as well. Others have given up much to enable the gospel to go to them. Time, effort and money passed hands in order for each one of us to come into the kingdom. It is not an option we have an obligation.

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So, we need to put partnering with other Christians on the agenda for 2021. Partnering with Christians in this Church, in this area, and across the globe. Our Church will partner with the Wee Waa Presbyterian, the villages in Hog Harbour and Walaha in Vanuatu and with missionaries in Broome, Indo China, Melbourne and Japan. We can’t just leave it to others. Which means we need to do one last thing according to the apostle Paul. We need to

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5. Pray (verses 30-33)

³⁰ *“I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to*

join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.” One of the best ways to partner with other Christians is to pray for them. Christians can help a struggling brother or sister by praying for them. They can support a Christian they have never met by praying for them. They may never ever step foot on a mission field but they will be on mission when they pray for those who are already there.

Because for many Christians life right now is a struggle. And so, Paul says join me in my struggle and pray for me. Paul the most successful Church planter in the history of the world says I can do nothing without your prayers. I need you to pray that *“I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favourably received by the Lord’s people there,³² so that I may come to you with joy, by God’s will, and in your company be refreshed.”*

Prayer is an essential Christian activity and without prayer the mission of the church will flounder. But prayer isn’t easy. You don’t just put the prayer in the slot and out comes the answer. It’s a battle to put aside time to pray each day. It is a battle to come to a weekly Church prayer meeting. It is a battle to pray when you don’t feel like praying.

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But prayer moves the hand that rocks the world. The story is told of someone who visited a big Baptist Church in Moscow after the end of the cold War. Noticing in the congregation, row upon row of women dressed in black, he asked the pastor, “Who are those ladies sitting up there in black?” “Ah”, said the pastor, “those are the women who prayed Communism out of Russia.” These old ladies had no guns but they possessed the most powerful weapon in the world, prayer.

So, we need to put prayer on the agenda for 2021. Not just as a last resort but a first principle. Prayer when no else is watching. Prayer in our family groups, home groups, ministry groups. Prayer as a Church. Prayer for the lost. Prayer for our world.

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So, there we have it. Pauls ambition is to proclaim, to praise, to pioneer, partner and to pray. So that all may hear. So that all may praise God, so that our lives might be completely transformed. That’s his ambition, that’s his aim, that’s his vision. And today he is saying to you and I “Follow me as I follow Christ.” He is saying to us the task is still urgent. The need is still great. The gospel still needs to be preached. Churches need to be planted. The poor needs to be provided for. And in all of this and more, God needs to be praised.

Do you know that when Bill Clinton was a school boy he had a teacher who filled his class with huge ambitions. He said you can be just what ever you want to be. So aim high. If you want to do it, you can even become President of the US. And Bill Clinton believed him.

Now as someone once said, *“If you aim for the moon and hit the fence will at least you hit the fence.”* But why don’t you and I aim for the moon. Why not ask God to change the world? Why not seek to win the world for Christ? Why not try and achieve unity within the Church? Why not? Now that might seem ambitious. But it might also be God’s will for us in 2021. So let us put him first this year. And see where He takes us. We might be surprised.