

Quiz Who are these 10 people who will be helping us with this service?
Write on the paper on your tables! You won't get all 10!!

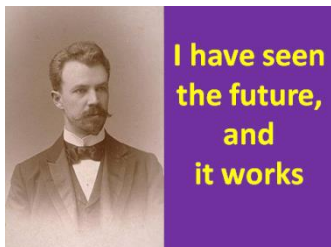
VDP 1-10



Answers gradually, but number 5 we've already had: Pikachu!

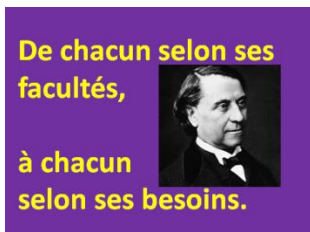
Talk 1 Let's put some flesh on that Vision we were singing about, and let's start with the real world.

VDP Lincoln Steffens + Quote



The answer to number 4 in the quiz is Lincoln Steffens, who is only famous for saying *I have seen the future, and it works*. He was an American reporter who visited the old Soviet Union in 1919, very soon after the Russian Revolution and the introduction of communism, and this was the phrase he often used to describe what he saw as an ideal society, although to be fair he had changed his mind 15 years later.

VDP Louis Blanc + Quote



The answer to number 8 in the quiz is Louis Blanc, and you will, I am sure be familiar with this phrase he wrote in 1851. *From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs* - a phrase popularised by Karl Marx in his vision of an ideal society. In reality, Communism failed to deliver by a long way,

mainly because it forgot to take human nature into account. And it's not just Communism that has failed to deliver an ideal society.

VDP Refugees



The various other ideologies around the world, including the Capitalism that runs our society, have given us a very different world from anything ideal, as we see on the news every day. We have seen the present, and it isn't working at all. Now I'm going to be bold this morning and suggest that two things written down by a man called Luke 2000 years ago might suggest a better way of doing things. First we'll sing a song asking for God to help us listen to His words:

SoF 2032 **Speak, O Lord, as we come to you**

Readings Luke 21: 1-4

 Acts 4: 32-37

VDP Acts 2: 46-47

Day after day they met
as a group in the Temple,
praising God,
and enjoying the good will
of all the people.

From Acts 2: 46-47

Talk 2 As we saw before the song, an ideal society is extremely hard to create. It may well be that the only ideal society in history is the one we heard described in our reading from Acts, that of the early Christian believers in Jerusalem. Complete unity, great generosity, a clear purpose and a radical vision making up what Louise, our Minister, has called an *extravagant community*. And did you notice in our reading that same phrase that Louis Blanc and Karl Marx used, *to each according to his needs*? So I want to suggest to you this morning that we should be re-creating in the church that ideal community. I don't think that's naïve. As we will see next week, the book of Acts does not shy from the reality that human nature destroys perfection, with the story of Ananias and

VDP DNA



Sapphira. Human nature will always be selfish because that is in our genes. That is just how it is. We are not only selfish, not always selfish, because we can sometimes be heroically brave and generous and even give up our own lives for

VDP Poppies



the benefit of others. Sometimes. But not always. The same individual person is capable both of scaling the heights and plumbing the depths, and it's this ambivalence that condemns human beings from ever being able to create an ideal society, an extravagant community. But it's also exactly why we should always be trying to do so. Because we are capable of great things, that is exactly what we should be trying to do. Ignoring this potential is to deny the purpose of our creation and the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have to do all we can to make this church like that early church in Jerusalem.

VDP Christ in the crowds



Coming to church is not about just spending our time with people we like and who believe exactly the same as we do. It's about *From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs*. It's not about being a middle class ghetto, safe from the cruel realities of the world on our television screens, it's about getting out there and getting our hands dirty.

VDP Jean-Paul Sartre



The answer to number 6 in the quiz is Jean-Paul Sartre. I am not a great fan of some of his philosophical ideas, but he was right about our need to get our hands dirty and put our beliefs into practice where life is difficult. And let's not think for a moment that just because we happen to live in a nice part of an attractive city, everything is rosy all around us.

VDP Crowd of people



People are ill. People are lonely. People are worried. People are dying. We have drug addicts and alcoholics. We have battered wives and abused children.

We have criminals and victims. People around us do not feel part of an *Extravagant Community*, and it is our job to show that it is possible, our job to give them love and hope, *to each according to his (or her) needs*. In the last part of our service, I'm going to give us the opportunity to commit ourselves to this ideal, and suggest how we can bring it about. So we are going to sing a song of commitment now.

SoF 851 I will offer up my life

VDP List of characteristics

1. Complete unity
2. Great generosity
3. A clear purpose
4. A radical vision

Talk 3 So, we are called by today's reading in the book of Acts to be a *church on the move*, and to create our own *extravagant community* here at Bents Green. You will remember the characteristics that we will need: complete unity, great generosity, a clear purpose and a radical vision. Unity doesn't mean that we all agree about everything. It's possible for me to believe that Sheffield United is the best team in Sheffield, and for you to believe something different, even though you're wrong! But despite our different views, we will still be united in our love of football. And it should be the same with theology.

VDP John Wesley



I hope you all got John Wesley right in the quiz, he was number 2, the man whose preaching led to the creation of Methodist churches, and who did so much to create modern Britain. He said, *Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.* They shall know we are Christians by our love, not by our theology. What unites us is our love of Jesus Christ, and that is all we need. If we all truly love Jesus Christ in this church, we are well on the way to becoming an *Extravagant Community*.

VDP List of characteristics (reprise)

1. Complete unity
2. Great generosity
3. A clear purpose
4. A radical vision

Great generosity. As we heard in the reading, the people of God sold their possessions for the apostles to use. You don't have to be rich to be generous. Remember the story of the widow's mite which we also heard earlier. In fact, the teaching of Jesus is that the richer we are, the harder it is for us to be generous.

VDP Camel and needle



I help in the door to door collection for Christian Aid, and I always get the impression that the bigger the house, the less likely they appear to want to give money. I may be wrong, but that's how it seems to me. And it's not only generosity of money, it's also generosity of time, where the same principle seems to apply. If you want something to be done, ask a busy person to do it, as they're more likely to find the time than the person who does very little. Is that true? And even more important than generosity of money and of time is generosity of nature. The person who is always encouraging people, like Barnabas, who values people, who praises people, who accepts and forgives people. If this church is full of people like that, we will indeed be an *Extravagant Community*.

VDP List of characteristics (2nd reprise)

1. Complete unity
2. Great generosity
3. A clear purpose
4. A radical vision

A clear purpose. Again from our reading, to give witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and thus to receive God's rich blessings. A commitment to bring the truth about Jesus into the lives of all who will listen. An eagerness to share the love of Jesus, to be a channel of His peace, to give to each according to his or her needs. A purpose that fills our every waking moment, *to spend and to be spent for them who have not yet my Saviour known*.

VDP Charles Wesley



Charles Wesley, John's brother, wrote those words in one of his hymns; Charles was number 10 in the quiz. A clear purpose that sees other people in the way that Jesus sees them, and seeks the very best for them, and loves them truly and selflessly. A church with people like this cannot be anything but an *Extravagant*

VDP List of characteristics (3rd reprise)

1. Complete unity
2. Great generosity
3. A clear purpose
4. A radical vision

Community. And finally, a radical vision. A vision not just for the people in Jerusalem, but a vision for the world. A vision not just for the here and now but for the months and years ahead. A vision not just for the lovely, but for the far from lovely. A vision for every single person who steps into the church, irrespective of who they are and what they are like, and a vision for every single person who never steps into the church. A vision which sees the good and the potential in other people and is determined to help them find it.

VDP 4 women



I'm conscious that it's just been men on my pictures so far, but here are 4 women who have had this kind of Christian vision for other people. Number 3 in the quiz is Elizabeth Fry, who had a vision for the prisoner. Number 9 is Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army, who had a vision for the poor and homeless. Number 7 is Corrie ten Boom, who had a vision for the persecuted. And number 1 is Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who had a vision for the outcasts. But most people with this kind of vision aren't famous. They just live out their vision in their ordinary lives, helping those in need according to their need. They are an essential part of an *Extravagant Community*.

VDP Bents Green Church



One last comment. I am sure we have lots of these characteristics here in this church to some degree, and it's not essential for every individual to have all of these characteristics, or even to have just one of them completely. It's not about what we are like, or what we have done or are doing. It's about our willingness to become more and more like Jesus in the future, to let His Holy Spirit give us these characteristics increasingly for the service of His people. It's not about us at all. It's about how much of Jesus is seen in us, our openness to his influence on our lives. If we let Jesus work in us and through us, we will indeed see the future *Extravagant Community*, and it works.

SoF 646 All I once held dear