



Fifth Sunday of Easter
24 April 2016

At the Heart. On the Edge.

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Acts 11.1-18; Revelation 21.1-6; John 13.31-35

One night not long ago after I'd taken the evening service a woman stopped me as she was leaving and pointed up at our East Window. She said, 'Was it bombed in the War? Is that why it's a bit funny?' I tried as courteously and respectfully as I could to say, actually, the artist intended it that way, and as a community we believe the way the oval nestles in but nonetheless challenges the rectilinear lattice tells us a lot more about how God's grace humbles yet restores our nature than a tidy bunch of identical squares might do.

The truth is, life isn't tidy, predictable and neat. Our attempt at St Martin's to form a community of beauty, truth and goodness in the midst of London's most famous square is never going to be about precision or perfection, and we can't blame the Luftwaffe for the fact that we have a shape that takes some getting used to. We're a complex organisation because we've grown organically like a garden rather than being constructed mechanically like a building. We've stayed close to the people that need us and value us, and so we've adapted to a shape that works for them. Legally we're several different organisations, the congregation and the company, the charity, the homeless centre, the Trust, the Chinese community centre, and so on. But everyone thinks of us as one.

So about nine months ago we started a process designed to affirm our unity while still expressing our diversity. This meant encouraging each part of St Martin's to retain and perhaps refresh its own mission statement. At the same time, led by our Parochial Church Council, in conversation with the other parts of St Martin's, we started to develop a vision that could encompass everything we do and stand for, in all our diverse activities and identities.

The notion of a vision statement has become part of corporate jargon. In general it refers to who and what you really are, and where you believe you're going. When we prepared our vision at St Martin's we bore in mind that it needed to be specific – we weren't looking for noble yet generic sentiments about community and justice and love. We wanted our words not to speak of detached attitudes and righteous stances, but of engaged dialogue and active encounter. We also recognised that, while St Martin's is a Christian church, we include in our life many staff, colleagues, partners and visitors who don't express their convictions theologically, so we needed to articulate our vision in ways the whole community could also embrace. We sought succinctly to refer to the things that everyone associates with St Martin's, like geographical location, architecture, homelessness, music, broadcasting and food. And we hoped to preserve what our East Window represents, that our vision isn't slick and smooth, but rough, ready, and real.

What we came up with, was agreed at the January PCC meeting, and subsequently endorsed by all the boards across the site, was this six-word, two-sentence vision: *At the Heart. On the Edge.* I want to explore with you what this vision means and what it says about what and who we are and where we're going.

Let's start with *At the Heart.* This is saying something most obviously about geography and culture, but more subtly about faith and life. St Martin's is, without question, at the heart of London. And, for all our identification with the outcast, it's at the heart of the establishment: it was built by a king, sits half a mile from 10 Downing Street, three-quarters from Parliament, and a mile from Buckingham Palace. Members of the cabinet and the Royal Family visit almost every year, and countless famous people come here at some stage to celebrate, to honour, or to mourn.

But more importantly 'At the Heart' refers implicitly to life, the universe and everything. For Christians, the heart of it all is God's decision never to be except to be with us in Christ. That triggers creation, as a place for God to be with us, incarnation, the moment Christ becomes flesh amongst us, and heaven, the time and space in which God is with us forever. As a church, St Martin's exists to celebrate, enjoy, and embody God being with us – the heart of it all. We're not about a narcissistic notion that we are the heart – we rest on the conviction that God is the heart and we want to be with God.

But in addition to indicating something central in relation to geography, culture and faith, the word 'heart' refers to feeling, humanity, passion, emotion. This means the arts, the creativity and joy that move us beyond ourselves, beyond rational thought, to a plane of hope and longing and desire and glory. It means companionship, from a meal maybe shared in the café or a gift for a friend perhaps bought in the shop. At the heart means not standing on the sidelines, telling the government what to do or waiting for the market to swing back to prosperity, but getting in the thick of the action, where honest mistakes are made but genuine good comes about, where new partners are found and social ideas take shape. But it also means genuine care. Not long after I came to this parish a national figure told me his mum, who lives 500 miles from London, sends an annual donation every year to St Martin-in-the-Fields. When he asked his mum why, she said, 'St Martin's cares about what matters.' That's what it means to be at the heart. It means practising and being known for compassion, understanding, love. Not walking away from people when life or the church or health or those close to them have let them down.

And that brings us to the second half of our vision, *On the edge*. In just the same way this has both obvious and subtle connotations. Most evidently, St Martin's is located on the edge of Trafalgar Square, looking over the splendour of the Gallery, the honour of Nelson's column, and the majesty of the embassies, but also the commotion of tourist and trader and traveller and the pageant of protest and performance. But more generally, the word 'edge' speaks of the conviction at St Martin's that God's heart is on the edge of human society, with those who have been excluded or rejected or ignored. God looked on the Hebrews in slavery, looked on Israel in exile, looked on Christ on the cross, and walks with the oppressed today. St Martin's isn't about bringing those on the imagined 'edge' into the exalted 'middle'; it's about saying we want to be where God is, and God's on the edge, so we want to be there too. A former archbishop said, 'If you ever lose your sense of the intensity and urgency of faith, go and hang out with those who still have it – and the chances are they're among those the world regards as the least, the last and the lost.' That's why we're on the edge: because we want to discover that intensity and urgency for ourselves.

Being 'edgy' is often associated with speaking out on behalf of the downtrodden. We don't do a lot of that at St Martin's, for one reason only: we want to walk alongside the downtrodden so that they can find the courage, the voice, and the opportunity to speak for themselves. We're not about swapping persecution for paternalism. But being on the edge does mean facing the cost of being, at times, on the edge of the church. Some of the issues we care deeply about are not areas of consensus in the church. We aim to practise what we believe is a true gospel where we receive all the gifts God is giving us, especially the ones that the church has for so long despised or patronised. That may sometimes make us unpopular. Being on the edge doesn't have to mean being relentlessly opinionated or impulsively impatient: we're in the persuading business, not the railroading business.

But the 'edge' doesn't just refer to issues of exclusion and disadvantage and injustice. St Martin's seeks to be on the leading edge, perhaps the cutting edge in a number of ways. We have a truly outstanding music programme, of voluntary and professional singers, free and commercial concerts, liturgical and performance events. It's getting better all the time. We're the greenest church in the diocese, and as well as seeking to embrace ecological concerns in everything we do we're seeking a similar rigour and scrutiny and renewal around questions of disability. Most extensively, we have a commercial enterprise that's integrated into the life of our church community and rather than simply being a source of funds is at the forefront of what we're trying to achieve in

London's civil economy. As we're trying to promote and share these commitments more broadly, we're developing a sense of how St Martin's isn't just about central London, but about an ethos that is national and in some respects beyond; and we're beginning to develop the appropriately named Heart-Edge Network to make these connections.

I want to take you back to our East Window, and the woman who asked if it was a bit funny because of a bomb blast during the war. Maybe it was a better question than it first appeared. St Martin's is a bit funny. It's made up of people who're a bit funny. We've been knocked out of shape by the wonder of God, or the challenges of life, or both. We want to make something beautiful, true and good together. And that leads us to be both at the heart and on the edge. We're a funny shape for a reason – a reason that we hope glorifies God in heaven and embraces those who struggle on earth. Long may it be so.