**Luke 9:10-17**

**Celebrating the launch of MABS**

“Nothing is impossible with God”. Do we believe that? “Nothing is impossible with God”. These are the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary, recorded in Luke 1:37, when he visited that young girl, maybe 12 years old, to tell her that she – as a young child – would be centre-stage in God’s purposes for the world.

“Nothing is impossible with God”.

This time 12 months ago, it was a verse I read and prayed over before speaking to the Church Wardens about a ridiculous vision I had for a major Youth & Community Project in Enfield. I knew that we would need about a quarter of a million pounds to get going. I knew that we would need community partnerships. I knew that we would need to recruit experts in the field. And the truth is, that I was very scared to even suggest it to the Church Wardens: they would think that this new Vicar they had just taken on was, as feared, crazy.

How ridiculous would it be to even dare to dream that this sort of money, this breadth of vision sharing, this level of resourcing, could possibly come to fruition in such a short period of time? But I remembered the words of the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:37: “Nothing is impossible with God”.

And I spoke with the Wardens and began to have tentative meetings with others last September and October, through to Christmas 2014. And over a period of 4 months, this aspirational promise that “nothing is impossible with God” became a self-evident reality that we could confidently claim as truth: “Nothing is impossible with God”.

This morning, we are celebrating the impossibility of impossibility. We are celebrating the extraordinary truth that when God wants to do something, it will be done.

MABS is a sign to us that, contrary to widespread speculation, God is alive and well and active in our community.

This comes as no surprise to us, of course. It’s not as if MABS is something new and unexpected. Instead, it is just the latest expression of love and compassion that has been central to the Enfield story for many years. MABS is part of an ongoing story.

And what is that story?

Well, perhaps it starts 800 years ago when this church was first built to meet the needs of the Enfield community. The story includes the efforts and dedication of lay people and priests over many centuries giving themselves to offer pastoral support and care for people on the margins of our society. The story includes the dedication and care of so many people over the last few decades who have faithfully run our Sunday Clubs and our Exodus youth group and Mosaic, week in, week out, so that there is provision for children and young people at the church. The story includes the hard work of teachers and support staff in our local schools who have worked such long hours over so many years to educate and nurture our young people. The story incorporates the dedication of our local Borough Council that has provided a Youth Service and Educational Services to meet the needs of so many in our local community.

The story stretches back 800 years and there are literally thousands of actors in it; each one playing their part to meet the needs of children, young people and families, each one seeking to offer support and care for people in their moments of needs, each one using skill and compassion to show love where it is needed most.

And here we are in September 2015 - and the MABS Youth & Community Project becomes the next installment of that ongoing story. It is something new – but it is part of something old: it is the continuation of the story for this period of time in Enfield.

MABS won’t last forever, of course. Just like every other initiative in our 800-year old story, it will come and it will go. We enjoy it while we have it but we won’t mourn it when God replaces it with something else more relevant in the future. But for now, for this period of time, MABS is a wonderful expression of the presence of God through his people. MABS embodies the same core values, the same motivation of all that has gone before, which is to share the love of God and nurture our young people so that they can become the best they can possibly be.

Generations come and go, projects come and go, the baton passes on - and the baton has passed to MABS for this installment in the story of the people of God. That is the context of what we celebrate today.

And to reflect for a short while with you about what MABS actually is, we are using this story of the feeding of the 5,000. It may seem a strange story to use in this context. But actually, I think there are three core values that run throughout this story that perfectly embody what underpins MABS and the ministry it will develop. So, let’s think about these three core values…

**1. MABS is about partnership work**

When we read this story of the feeding of the 5,000, we get a sense that this is not a story about Jesus alone but is actually a story about partnership. In verse 10, the disciples tell their stories to Jesus. In verse 11, the crowds are drawing near to Jesus to hear his teaching. In verse 15, the disciples get everyone sitting down to receive the food. In verse 16, Jesus performs the miracle with the loaves and fishes. This is a story about many people working together and, as the partnership activity unfolds, so a community experience is born and transformation occurs.

And, as a core value at the heart of MABS is the commitment to develop as a partnership project. MABS is not about Jo Griffiths delivering on her own. MABS is not about Barry Easton delivering on his own. MABS is not about St. Andrew’s delivering in isolation. MABS is about a community coming together to offer pastoral care and support to young people and families. And I am so grateful to the Borough Council, and St. Andrew’s Primary School and Enfield Grammar School and Enfield Church Trust for Girls for partnering with us at this early stage to get MABS up and running. And God willing, there will be many more partners from across the community coming on board with this project over the next few months.

And there is one key partner to the project who needs to be mentioned here - and I want to give thanks to God for her - and that is a lady called Mabs Mardulyn. I know that there are one or two people here today who knew Mabs Mardulyn well and whose lives were inextricably bound up with hers through friendship. Mabs Mardulyn was a member of St. Andrew’s Church many years ago and when she died, her legacy was to use her estate to set up a Trust Fund that would be dedicated to providing youth and children’s ministry across the world.

Last autumn, I met the Board of the Mardulyn Trust on a number of occasions and very generously, they have provided a substantial sum of money without which this project would not be in existence now. In recognition of their generosity and Mrs Mardulyn’s benefaction, we have named the project MABS - and I hope that she would be very proud of what is happening here today.

Thank God for Mabs Mardulyn: the primary partner in our project: God’s gift to us all, even now…

But the need for partnership continues and will flourish which, of course, begs the question, “How can you be a partner in MABS?” Perhaps your partnership will involve setting up a Standing Order to partner financially with us. Perhaps your partnership will involve you volunteering for some of the activities. Perhaps your partnership will mean that you pray for MABS every day. Perhaps your partnership will mean that you resolve to speak only encouraging words to Barry and Jo as they seek to move this project forward. In one way or another, we can all be partners in MABS - and I would urge you this morning to think through what that means for you personally.

So firstly, MABS is a partnership project.

**2. MABS is about meeting the whole person: body, mind and spirit**

In this story of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus attends to the whole person: body, mind and spirit.

In terms of the body, he recognizes that the people are hungry and that they need feeding and so he feeds them – it’s as simple as that.

In terms of the mind, he uses this opportunity to stretch the disciples’ thinking: he gives them a problem to solve, in verse 13, he says: “You give them something to eat”. The disciples become creatively involved in sorting out the problem and, as a result, their minds are stretched.

In terms of the spirit, it is evident that the faith of many grew as a result of the miracle that was performed in their midst.

Jesus was concerned for the whole person: body, mind and spirit.

In the same way, MABS is a project devoted to the whole person. We want to see children, young people and families grow as whole human beings and become the people that God has truly destined them to be: to fulfill their potential as children of God and become whole people in their citizenship and engagement with society.

So for that reason, the range of activities undertaken through MABS will be vast: Bible study, prayer groups, Sunday Clubs, holiday clubs, residentials for young people, and lots of opportunities for them to grow with God. But in addition to that, we want to serve people on a broader canvas of human compassion too: Self-esteem work, drug and alcohol awareness, sexual health programs, one-to-one listening, work with single parents and teenage parents, mentoring of young people, parenting programs, advocacy work, literacy and language courses, debt counseling and so much more…

God does not just love us as disembodied spirits: we have been created as whole people - body, mind and spirit - and MABS will be ministering to whole people in body, mind and spirit.

I’ve mentioned before the story of a lady once, who was homeless and she turned up on her Vicar’s doorstep for help and the Vicar said, “I’ll pray for you”. Yes, of course we need to pray - but that can never be an excuse for inactivity when faced with injustice and need. That lady wrote a poem and it goes like this:

“I was hungry

and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned

and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked

and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick

and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless

and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely

and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God

But I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.”

Christian love focuses on the whole person. And it is not enough for us just to pray for people’s eternal salvation and work on the most obvious aspects of spiritual formation for young people. If MABS is to be truly Christlike in its activities, it must actively engage in social action in its broadest sense and work for transformation of people’s lives in body, mind and spirit.

That is the way of Christ – and that will be the way of MABS.

So firstly, MABS is a partnership project

Secondly, MABS will care for the whole person: body, mind and spirit

**3. MABS is about us learning from the young people in our community**

When I was working in India in May this year, I got up at 6.00 each morning to go to Mass at the Catholic Church that was situated about 500 yards down the road from where Jo and I were staying. One morning, I got up and went outside and it was absolutely pouring with rain with a ferocity that comes at the onset of monsoon season. And I stood on the porch of our house, thinking about how I was going to get to church 500 yards away without looking like a drowned rat. On the other side of the road, there was a little Hindu girl aged maybe 7 or 8 years old heading up the road with an umbrella in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go. She saw me, stopped, and walked over. My Hindi is pretty poor but I understood when she said to me, “Where are you going?” In my pigeon Hindi, I replied, “I want to go to church down the road”. She took me by the hand, put the umbrella over my head and walked me down to the church so I wouldn’t get wet.

It was the most beautiful moment of my entire trip: because in that young, Hindu girl, I saw the face of God and I received kindness and compassion from the most unlikely source.

It taught me afresh a central truth of the Christian Gospel: that faith is essentially childlike and that children are our teachers. If we adults want to learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and to be whole as human beings, we must be prepared to be taught by our children. Jesus says in Mark 10:15, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”. As adults, we are to be mentored in the faith and mentored in life by our children: they are our spiritual teachers.

The feeding of the 5,000 is one of only two stories that are recorded by all four Gospel writers. And each of the Gospel writers bring out different details of the story and we need to read them all to get a sense of what went on that day. And one of the most amazing aspects of this story, I think, is omitted by Luke but is told in John’s version of the story. Let me read to you from John 6:9: “One of Jesus’ disciples, Andrew, said to Jesus, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish’.” And it was the gift from the boy that was the foundation of the miracle. A whole community of 5,000 men and many women and children were transformed and fed through the gift of a child.

If we think that MABS is here just to give to and minister to children and young people, then we are wrong. MABS fundamentally has been set up to recognize and celebrate the gift that children are to us and to acknowledge the deep spiritual truth that, as adults, we can receive from our children and learn from our children and that children in Enfield are a gift from God to us and that God will speak to us through our children.

Of course, we will be nurturing children and young people; supporting them and educating them. But at the heart of MABS is the realization that youth work is a reciprocal dialogue. We give to children and young people but, in equal measure, we receive from them.

MABS is about us learning from our children, celebrating them, and recognizing God within them.

As we serve our children, we are serving God in our midst: they are Christ-bearers, they are holy vessels and we will honour our children and young people as such in everything we do.

So today is a day of celebration. We celebrate the ongoing story of God in this community that stretches back 8 Centuries and more. We celebrate the dedication of so many thousands of people through the years who have given themselves to the wellbeing of children, young people and families in our Enfield community. We celebrate the generosity of Mabs Mardulyn who has made this project possible. We celebrate the courage and vision of Enfield Borough Council, St. Andrew’s Primary School, Enfield Grammar School, Enfield Church Trust for Girls and the congregation of St. Andrew’s Church in bringing this project to birth. We celebrate the gifts and talents and expertise of Jo Griffiths and Barry Easton and all that they will bring to this community. We celebrate the volunteers who will make the ministry happen in the months and years to come. We celebrate our children and young people, recognizing that, when they come back to join us in a few minutes time, God will come into our midst in them and through them and that they are our spiritual leaders.

And most importantly today, we celebrate the timeless truth announced to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the timeless truth testified to in this church through hundreds of years, the timeless truth experienced by so many of us in our own lives, that “nothing is impossible with God”.

“Nothing is impossible with God”.

So through the developing ministry of MABS that is to come: to God be the glory.

We celebrate the impossibility of impossibility. And we anticipate with joy all that God will be doing here amongst us.

“Nothing is impossible with God”.