

Sermon 60th Anniversary

In all the talk about Back to the Future in recent weeks one question has emerged which I'm sure we'd have our own answer for: if you could go back in time – or into the future, which would it be? And that's been the question as we approached this 60th anniversary – to look back, or to look towards the future. Over the next few minutes I'd like to demonstrate that I believe there's room for both at such a time as this. That it's good to look back, not just for nostalgic or sentimental reasons but that it's a healthy exercise that reminds us of the Lord's faithfulness and care. But it's also important to look forward, and in so doing to prayerfully seek the Lord's will for our lives as individuals and as a church.

So our first point is this: Look back with His-tory. With Matthew living in London I said something when Mark began looking at unis that would prove to be prophetic – knowing our luck he'll probably end up in Newcastle. Well, at half-term we clocked up 600 miles visiting them both in their respective ends of the country, and we had a much smoother journey than the one when we took Mark up in September.

That journey had a somewhat nightmare ending. We crawled through Newcastle city centre, but I would have taken being bored anytime compared to what happened next. It was as we were going through a tunnel at two miles an hour that Paula noticed something come up from the bonnet. My temperature gauge then started flashing and sure enough, for the second consecutive time on a trip to the north-east, the car was overheating. This was a somewhat alarming scenario given where we were but fortunately we didn't have much further to go. When we arrived at Mark's new home, I looked under the bonnet and sure enough all the water had gone from the little tank where the coolant was supposed to be. Now when I told this story in assembly the other week and came to this point I asked the children where I might find some water to fill up my tank until I got to a garage. 'The river?' one boy suggested; 'the university' another one helpfully piped up. The third suggestion was the one I actually did on the day, 'a water bottle' which we had some of in the car. A good idea, I thought at the time, so there I was aiming to fill up the tank; it wasn't anti-freeze but it was better than nothing and it was very resourceful of me to think of such a thing. At this point Paula emerged from her latest trip to the eighth floor and said 'what are you doing?' 'I'm just using these water bottles to fill it up' I said. 'That's not water' she said, 'that's blackcurrant!'

I was filling the car up with Robinson's no added sugar blackcurrant. The fact was, though that what I was putting wasn't appearing to be retained anyway. Like the wages earned it was like we were putting them in a purse with holes in. I tried some actual water as well, and that wasn't working either. Whatever I did was not enough.

Look at verse 6: 'you have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in'. Sixty years is a

long journey. A number here this morning have been on that road for a good proportion of that time; a few as we've seen for all of it. How do you feel? All the planting, all the hard work, all that you've put in. Does it sometimes feel like, as with the water tank, you put so much in but when you look there's nothing there? And that can be very disheartening.

'Give careful thought to your ways' says the Lord, not once but twice (verses 5 and 7). His explanation is a somewhat damning verdict that all the expectations have fallen flat because the people were busier with their own houses than with their own house. Their priorities were all wrong.

Now we always need to be careful crudely translating the Lord's word from one situation unique in history to our own, and this would seem a strange word anyway to a church where a number work incredibly hard to make things happen and keep things going. But it may be that there's something here for us at this time. Let's start with me as an example. I mentioned before that my daily Bible reading was, with good intentions, relegated to very last thing at night, so it was the last thing going into my mind before I went to sleep. The problem was that I was already half asleep by the time I came to the reading, or in some cases had actually *been* asleep, so I wasn't getting much out of it. And that, for any Christian, but particularly someone who's supposed to be a full-time elder, is just not good enough.

So I moved my Bible reading slot to lunchtime with my sandwiches. Now I literally chew over the word of God, and I get so much more out of it. And all the hard work counts for less, I won't say nothing, but will have less impact if we're not turning up to pray. I know that much faithful prayer goes on through the week, and that not everyone is able to make it on a Thursday. Nevertheless we can hardly expect to double the numbers in the church if we're halving them at the prayer meeting. For this meeting, as well as praying for things yet to come, is also an opportunity to praise the Lord for prayers already answered. And I must admit, there's room for improvement here. We could certainly do with a bit more thanksgiving at our prayer meetings for all the Lord has done. There's an old hymn, no. 428 in the Baptist hymn book, not that that's in the least bit relevant – but just in case you had one knocking about at home – 'Come and rejoice with me' and through each verse it gives a reason for doing so. And I would say 'come and rejoice with me' – and it is me sometimes until the next person turns up – at what the Lord has done – and is doing.

The Old Testament is littered with examples of recollections of the Lord at work, especially through those seminal events of the deliverance from Egypt and the Lord's subsequent care for His people. Likewise we should strive to look back with thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done in our lives. The Bible talks of 'always giving thanks for everything' and I find that the more we do that the greater number of reasons I end up with to show my gratitude and indeed my worship to the One who has made it all possible. For looking back at God's help in the past can

strengthen us to face the present, and that brings us onto our second point: look around with his help.

Chapter two verse three: 'who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you? Does it not seem to you like nothing?' Well let's take the first of those questions: 'who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? When I look back over my time here, and there'll come a time when that will be in the past, the funerals will be among the most vivid memories? Over of them. Fewer and fewer are left who saw this house in its former glory, with the packed Sunday School and the bulging youth group. It can be easier to focus on who's not here than who is, and not without reason because we have lost so many cherished members of our church family. But look at who *is* here. 'I am with you' says the Lord. He said it in 1:13 and He says it again in 2:4. When we look around with our human eyes and possibly aching hearts we can feel very discouraged, but when we look around at what the Lord is doing and remember that he is with us that can make such a difference, and we need to hold on to His presence when we consider this second question: 'how does it look to you now?'

At half-term we went to see Matthew and he and Cynthia took us to what has become a favourite eating place for them, Five Guys. We walked half way down Oxford Street to get there but when we arrived Paula and I had a wry smile because their new haunt, next to the Palladium and just round the corner from our college as was, was very much our old one. So after we'd eaten we couldn't resist going to have a look and having our picture taken by the place where we'd originally met. I thought that was a nice moment so I stuck it on Facebook but whilst it was a very good one of Paula it was a terrible one of me. I was talking to my mum the other week and she said 'your brother saw your picture on Facebook' and then she added 'he said it wasn't a very good picture.'

Thanks Phil. How does it look to you now? The picture can be a bit discouraging, but look's who's here. Look who's with us! The God who made the heavens and the earth and everything in them. His Spirit remains among us. Do not fear.

Times have changed immeasurably since this church was set up. Our community is vastly different to the one in which Goodwood was established. But with the Lord's help we can be strong and work with all the opportunities he is sending: at Spencefield Grange, at the school, with the neighbourhood group. The Lord is with us as we seek to faithfully continue the midweek activities in which a number work so hard. With his help it's amazing what can be achieved. 'With my God I can scale a wall' it says in Psalm 18. How it looks to us now is very different but 'Be strong' says the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you.'

So much would seem to be against us. On more than one occasion I have asked the Lord what he is doing. You may have done the same yourself. But God is here. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here. Be strong, for His Spirit

remains among us, so we are not to fear but to fall down on our knees and worship. For we have a God who is not only reassuring with His presence but also in His power, of which He has lost none, and that brings us onto our third and final point: Look to the future with His hope.

'This is what the Lord Almighty says' in 2:6, 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory', says the Lord Almighty. This was a message to the people of God all those years ago. But in the future we are currently in, the 2015 those who began this church may wondered about, there are more nations represented within a square mile of this building than they could possibly have imagined. Some have come to the building, for the Ark, or one of the children's' clubs. Others a number of us rub shoulders with every day. How wonderful it would be if some came to the Lord, that the desired of nations will come, both in terms of those from those countries into a living relationship with the Lord Jesus and the Christ Himself coming in a new and miraculous way into the hearts of the community around us. That this house may be filled with the glory of the Lord, and the glory of the present house may be greater than that of the former one.

We seem to be getting into 'When a child is born' territory, when he has his idealistic vision of world peace, and we say 'it's all a dream', but the Lord's word here in Haggai is to be strong and work, for He is with us, and with Him nothing is impossible. The promise is when we look to the future that the Lord will do something. The challenge is the definition of 'a little while.' That could mean anything. But it's not for us to sit around working it out, as some of the early Christians were tempted to do regarding the return of Christ. We are to be strong, and work, and get on with what He wants us to do. We are to be still, and pray, alongside the labour, and keep working out what that is. Because we have good news, and it's far too important to keep to ourselves.

Alongside other anniversaries at this time it's also 60 years since the first television news broadcasts. But although the ways of delivering the news has changed, what hasn't is the unremitting gloom that goes with watching it. The night before I wrote this it was a particularly bad news day: the aftermath of the Russian airliner coming down in the Sinai desert; the terrible scenes in Burundi, not to mention the ongoing misery in Syria and the resulting migrant crisis. We are called to pray about these things, but also to be presenters of good news, that God loved the world so much he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life.

A while ago I suggested our tagline should be 'building a family that expresses the love of God.' And whilst it hasn't been taken up in an official capacity, it remains a good aim for us as we go into our seventh decade of outreach here. The whole building idea of course resonates with Haggai, with the call to build the house of the

Lord. But the building is twofold - spiritual, in terms of our worship and devotional life as a church and as individuals. That we are built up in our faith when we meet together round the Lord's Table, in our services, in our times of prayer and Bible study on Thursday nights. The family of God is built up through these times. Secondly the building is numerical, as, strengthened by the spiritual building, we go out with this good news, and the family grows in quantity as well as in spiritual quality.

And the whole idea of family is important, that we belong to the Lord and to one another; that we share our joys and sorrows both here in this house, in times such as the Family News slot, and out there in the week, through prayer and visiting where possible.

The expression of the love of God that results, both in terms of care for one another, and reaching out with the good news of his love, will in turn build God's family. Ultimately, of course, it's the Lord's church and he does the building. 'Unless the Lord builds the house', it says in Psalm 127, 'the workers labour in vain.' Jesus said 'I will build my church' but the context of that statement is that He'll do it through fallible and weak people like Peter.

'In this place', says the Lord in 2:9, 'I will grant peace.' How wonderful if this place could be one where those who come in find peace with God. That we will find peace in an uncertain era. We have peace with God, Paul tells the Romans, 'through our Lord Jesus Christ.' Peace for the future, both in this life and in the one to come.

It was on this day, November 22nd 1963 that John F Kennedy was assassinated. Less well known is who else also died within hours of this momentous event taking place – Aldous Huxley and CS Lewis. It was CS Lewis who died first, in his brother's arms, at 5.30pm in his Oxford home. He was just a week shy of 65. One hour later, 12.30pm in Texas, the 46 year old President was shot, and at 5.20pm local time in Los Angeles, Aldous Huxley's life came to an end aged 69.

There's no evidence that Huxley read Lewis, or that Kennedy read either, but three men represented three very different mindsets brought together in a fictional debate called 'Between Heaven and Hell' by a Boston college philosophy professor in 1982. In it he represents Lewis as 'mere Christianity', Kennedy as 'modern humanism' and Huxley as 'Eastern pantheism'.

By another striking turn of events, both CS Lewis and Huxley lost their respective 45 year old mothers in 1908 to cancer. When their own lives came to an end, along with JFK, their philosophies were as different as ever. Huxley lost his possessions in a house fire, prompting him to say 'I am evidently intended to learn...that you can't take it with you...I took it as a sign that the grim reaper was having a good look at me.' Contrast those words with that of CS Lewis, who said 'I have done all that I

wanted to do and I am ready to go.' He had the hope of eternity. Among his favourite themes in his writings were the afterlife, the resurrection, and heaven itself.

Perhaps I should leave the final word not with the famous men of history but with our own George Bowerman, born between Lewis and Kennedy but who would survive them by over half a century. Writing about his life, George said

Because we can look back as well as forward, we can acknowledge his guidance and direction through all our days

So as I draw to a close, let's remind ourselves of our three points today: Look back with His-tory. Let's be those who are in the habit of recalling God's faithfulness as a trigger to encourage present faith. Look around with God's help. How it looks to us now is very different from how it did in the past – in the church, in the community, in the world around us. But we are to be strong and work, for God is with us; His Spirit remains among us, and we are not to fear the future but to embrace it knowing that, as we said the other week, God will be there, and that he has plans that are beyond anything we could ask or imagine.

There is room at such a time to look back – and to the future. May we be those who, in whichever direction we are facing, are looking to the Lord and His strength, seeking His face always. And in so doing, may we see the promised glory of the new house as the Lord, through us, builds His church.