

Advent – preparation and expectation

Acts 18: 1-11

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

Church is about mission. It is a dynamic group of disciples who gather together in opposition to the values and culture around them to proclaim a living truth that Jesus is here amongst us by his Spirit, and he has broken the power of death and sin, that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life. A church is an outpost of heaven here on earth, and that within this outpost different rules apply.

Here is a great chapter in the church – Paul in Corinth. And it is a significant one. Paul stayed longer here than anywhere else other than Ephesus – remember that one?

Why did he hang around for so long? **Opportunity** – God said – don’t worry about speaking out and doing the stuff here – I have your back. And what is more, there is opportunity here, so I want you to go for it and maximise the fruit.

I wanted to share this story with you because it is what I feel God is saying to us, Plymouth Vineyard, for 2019.

You might think it is jumping the gun a bit talking about next year, but this is the first Sunday of advent. Advent: a time to preparation, to get ready for the arrival of Jesus, but also as well as looking back to the coming of the Messiah to save Israel, looking forward to Jesus 2nd coming. And for us as a church at the end of what has been a year of faithfulness and trust, to prepare for the next year because I sense God is drawing our attention to opportunity, and wanting us to step out in faith to make the most of his invitation...

1. Focus, vision and momentum

Every church needs a focus, and your focus can change. Our vision stays the same, but the focus is like ‘which pedal are we going to press down on right now?’

Our vision remains the same. We are into growing disciples. We want this to be a place where people get to know Jesus personally, experience his transformation in their lives, and learn to live a missional life engaged with doing what he is calling them to do.

Our Come Home, Know God and Love Others is the means by which this happens – the hook as it were.

And then out of that flows the big question – well how are we going to do it? I mean, every church wants to grow disciples don’t they? Who has God called Plymouth Vineyard 2019 to be, and what has he called them to do?

When we know what we are called to do, and we start to get on and achieve it – that creates momentum. That creates the buzz that we are actually doing something significant here – we are moving forward.

People sometimes mistake this for vision. The other common mistake is that when the steam or the zip goes out of you personally you look to have that met in church.

I've seen this happen this year. Personally there are a number of people here who have had a tricky year personally. They have been battling through stuff, and it has felt a bit of a wilderness time. I sort of imagine that this is what Moses experienced. He ran away from Egypt and spent 40 years herding sheep. I don't think he had a whole lot of excitement, vision, momentum or even blessing in his life. He just had to go through it, but in that place God did an awful lot of preparation, healing and formation.

So occasionally people have come to me this year and said things like 'The church doesn't seem to have much vision.' And I think hmmm well we do and we try and communicate it in some form every week. Perhaps what is going on here is personal – what is your vision? What if God is doing in you right now?

But also what has been happening personally in people's lives has been reflected in church. I came out of Christmas last year gearing up for a great year, and what happened? Jan 5th I was in hospital! Sarah had 6 months out from church leading as well, which she will be unpacking next year at some point. Generally there were lots of people who were side-lined in one way or another, and although church grew and in many ways prospered, this year has also been a time of cutting back in what we have been engaged with. We have done less and in some ways at times been in survival mode. In other words momentum has been turned down a bit.

What do we do at those times? If it is God we resist the fear that drives us to generate false momentum, and we go with what God is doing with us, with out hope and trust in God sustained by pressing into Jesus. I have been in plenty of places that generate false momentum and fear slowing down or not being busy. It is not good for the soul, and we have avoided it, putting our faith in God and being prepared to wait, rather than panicking and delivering a false sacrifice like Saul did in 1 Samuel 13.

Let's not confuse momentum for vision, and let us be obedient to what we feel God is saying. If he wanted us to experience another year of waiting and formation are we OK with that? Well yes if part of the deal was closer relationship with Jesus.

But also I have to admit to a growing hunger for God to extend, expand and do his thing. I resonate with the prayer of Habbakuk

Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.
Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.

The good news is that he seems to be indicating that this is stirring, which is why this morning as part of our series on I Love Church I am tying it in with advent and sharing with you what I think he wants us as a church to get ready for in 2019.

I got this word emailed from Tim

Someone who's been quite prophetic (very prophetic I should say) for SWYM talked about a year of breakthrough (for SWYM, but also more widely). He was sharing that 2017 was a year of massive ups and massive downs, but his sense was that 2018 would be different. He was speaking about 2018 seeing the Church more effective and seeing the Holy Spirit move more powerful over and through our ministries and churches and families.

Just something I've been weighing up, but I think it is something to pray in to. This past year has been tough for a lot of people, it's easy to get bogged down in the mire, but I do feel that this coming year is worth praying and seeking God's power for new and bigger things.

All very good, but what is significant is that this ties in with many other words given at prayer meetings, church, emailed to me or spoken out generally.

The most recent example was last week. Sarah and I were at the Area Leaders Gathering and got there early, were heading to the gym but popped into the café area first, and bumped into John Scott and Jamie Watters.

They are both very prophetic and started to prod and probe what was on my heart for the church in the year ahead. Some of which I will share in a moment.

It was great because, although we didn't get to the gym, what was set off was a theme that ran through the week – God began to affirm and expand on that original word.

2. What is God turning our focus to next year?

At various times we have focussed on community, invitational culture, outreach and so on. All very good and essential things – and we will continue pressing into all of them.

But over the last few months God has begun to stir something in me around shifting the focus from building his church (through programmes, systems, teaching etc) to building the people. A focus from building an amazing church into building amazing people.

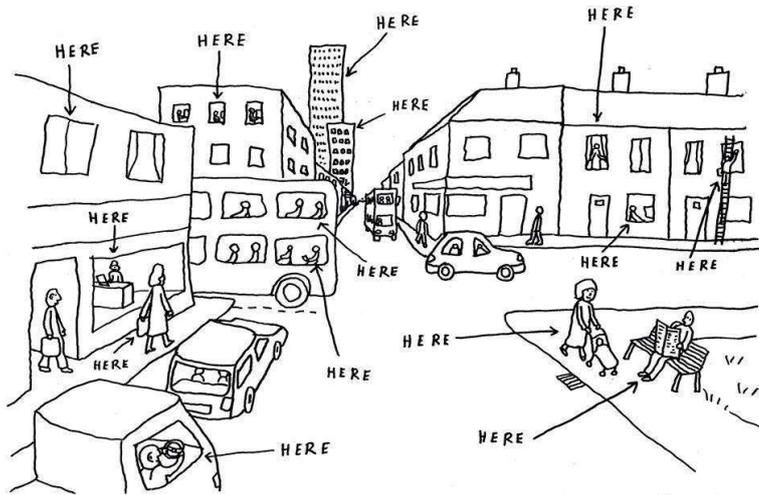
What will that look like?

- (a) **Identity.** We need to know who we are and what we carry as sons and daughters of the most high. A really good understanding of the New Covenant that Jesus has made possible through his death and resurrection. To fully embrace the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:17 that if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! So we will spend time grasping what it is to be 'in Christ' and what that means for us in terms of being new creations.

The old covenant is so easy to slip back into, where we have to work to earn salvation and forgiveness, rather than receiving it as a gift. Working hard to try and heal the old self, where in actual fact the old self is dead and buried. Move on! Move from sinner to saint. From slave to son. From self to soldier.

- (b) **Signs and wonders.** And the self to soldier bit brings us nicely on to the second element of being an amazing person. We get to carry to Kingdom to the world and use our authority to command a blessing. This is where the action is, the fun stuff. We will be training people to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit. These gifts are freely available – there for us to use to set captives free, heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, expel demons and raise the dead. Signs are there to point to something, and these are gifts and tools that have always been an important part of the Vineyard heritage, and there is a sense that he is calling us all – Vineyard churches throughout the nation – to rediscover the signs and wonder Holy Spirit ministry that kicked it all off in the first place.

WHERE THE CHURCH IS



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This is my favourite picture of church.

Imagine this time next year a people who have a deep understanding and security in who they are in Christ, and operate out of that place in ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit. This would be a dangerous place to be for starters. And we would all be a lot more healed up, a lot more full of joy, and dare I say it there would be a lot more stories from the front about what God has done through us all during the week as we have gone about our business available to be used by him in miraculous ways!

By the way – this is not new – it is happening now. By plenty of people not just me and Sarah. We want to hear those stories and use them to encourage each other, and we want it to multiply.

There was a growing sense of expectation at the Area Leaders Gathering that this was a move of God – he was stirring some stuff amongst his people. It was very exciting. My prayer is that he will stir you as well.

It just so happens that we have a record number of people going to NLC this year, where the subject will be Identity and doing the works of Jesus out of that identity. It is so close to our focus it is spooky. Coincidence? I think not.

And John and Debbie have called a fast for 21 days throughout January. A time of focussed prayer. Guess what? We have planned in a week of prayer and fasting January 7th – 13th. We are considering whether or not to extend this for a further 14 days – the idea here isn't to twist God's arm but to position ourselves under the rainspout of his grace.

We want transformation for ourselves and for the people around us do we not? Or at least we want to want it.

3. Building for the future

Once we have established that our number 1 priority is to be obedient to Jesus and press into intimacy with him, our number 2 priority is cracking on with the focus of the year which is understanding our identity and learning to minister out of that place. It brings us nicely onto our number 3 priority which I suspect will grab our imaginations, but it also present a bit of a challenge.

It all concerns where we meet, and where we as a church call home.

I need to back up and give you some context.

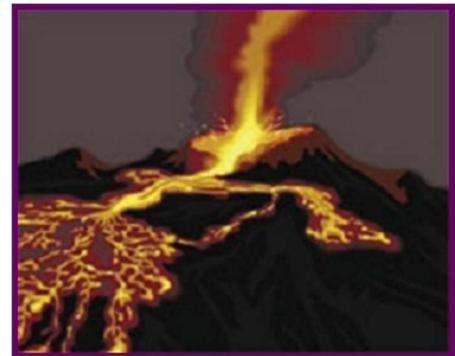
At New Wine right at the start of the church's life we heard some talks about God's heart for the poor and the marginalised and we knew that some sort of compassion ministry, where we could serve and help those in need, should be at the very heart of what we did. We began the Children's Storehouse. The Holy Spirit had planted into our hearts a vision of having a shop front from where we could run this compassion ministry as well as having church offices and ministry rooms. We had a collection and the little group of people raised £10,000 which was enough to get a place – but where and what? We looked around where we lived and then I asked someone in church to get a short list together of premises, which he duly did according to a list of priorities I had put together.

Lo and behold it took us to the City Centre and Kinterbury House. I hadn't dreamt that we would be in town – my vision wasn't that expansive. But it matched the criteria and was clearly the best option. It cost £20,000 in the end to refurbish it and bring it up to standard, with the whole church helping and pitching in.

This is an example of God taking a vision and expanding it, drawing it forward, making it more. Another is in the daffodils that we used to give out around Honicknowle on Mother's Day. We used to meet in Honicknowle. Our new City Centre profile led me to transfer this ministry into the City Centre.

So we gave the daffodils out just outside Drake's Circus where we will be doing the carol singing later this month. As we were doing it God gave me a picture.

A bit like a volcano erupting and lava pouring in streams out into the surrounding land, the yellow daffodils were being taken by people from the centre into the different parts of Plymouth – a picture of the gathered church receiving love and power from God and taking it out around the City and beyond.



This is another picture of church, and a confirmation that he was calling us to meet in the centre. So we began a search for a city centre home for both Sundays and midweek.

That was a few years ago now. Soon after that process began someone had a word that there would be a stepping stone into the City Centre. Not long after that we moved our services here to Plymouth High. It's been brilliant here. More central, walking distance for many. But it isn't it.

We are not outgrowing it yet. There is plenty of space if we rearrange things and park sensibly, but God is growing this church. (It's lovely to leave that to him and for us to concentrate on growing the people don't you think?). We don't want to be selfish and keep church nice for ourselves whilst restricting the room for people seeking do we?

What if this was a stepping stone for a few years whilst we were prepared for something bigger by the Lord?

And what of Kinterbury House? We have been there for almost ten years now. It is looking very tired, we have outgrown it, and the lease expires 11 March 2020, so we have a year to go.

Imagine a place where we had a permanent presence, Sundays and midweek under one roof, a resource for the city and something that would release entrepreneurial, spirit-filled outreach work in a poor part of the city that would transform lives and lift people out of poverty!

Think pop up charity shops with a difference, parent and toddler groups, parenting courses, cookery classes, servant evangelism and healing on the streets where you can say to people – see that building there? That's our church come and meet them!

This is our vision for the new Vineyard Centre but it has its challenges.

1. **Finding a place** – we have been riding this rollercoaster of emotions for a few years now. Last summer we came very close to having some really good news to share but it fell away at the last moment. We aren't taking you on that ride with us, and I'm glad we took that decision right at the start.

What can I do? Pray – not just for the property to be released, but for those involved to be able to steward their hearts with hope in the meantime.

We have Luke Pollard and the Ward Counsellors coming to visit on January 25th to see what we do and hopefully get behind us in making some of this empty property available.

2. **Money!** We don't know what we will need. You can give now, so that when we have to move we can do so with confidence, but the best thing to do right now would be review or start your regular giving, which helps us budget and build for the future.
3. **Get ready for sacrifice.** Moving into the city centre will be more inconvenient and limiting than our current situation. We have parking here and at the VC for starters. We will be coming into the City for a reason – to seek and save the lost, and to bring social and economic transformation to the City. A city where currently those born in Hartley or Plympton have a higher life expectancy than those born in Devonport by about 10 years. This is us looking to do something about that.
4. **Trusting in God.** There are so many risks associated with this, but we are called to be a risk-taking people. For me personally and for us as a church, we are stepping out to cross the Jordan. This was the metaphor I used when I first shared this with the church 4 years ago, and moving here to Plymouth High could be seen as that first step, I think God is calling us to make another step next year. You know what that will mean don't you? We will have both feet in the river!

2 Corinthians 6

As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says,

“In the time of my favour I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you.”

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.