

TJW, HT, 6.1.08, 1 Peter 2.4-12

You know the old saying that, if you aim at nothing, you're guaranteed to hit it every time.

Regulars will know that as a church-family we've recently committed ourselves to aim... certainly not at nothing - and in fact at something pretty big.

Under the heading of the 'Next Big Step', we're aiming to start preparing now, to plant out from our existing church-family, to plant a new church, some time in 2009. We'll also be re-visioning what we do here at the "home base", if you want to call it that.

Every year, now, at the beginning of January, and again in September, we give a Sunday to being a Vision Sunday, where Andy or I try to set the vision for an aspect of the church's life.

Last September we set a focus for evangelism, and I have been really thrilled to see how that is progressing.

We've recently finished a successful Christianity Explored course - and please join me in praying that there will be lasting fruit from that - of lives transformed by the grace of Christ.

In February we'll run a shorter evangelistic course of a different style, focusing on questions like, "Why does God allow pain?", and "Why is religion full of hypocrites?".

I know that some people have long felt that a low-key course like this would be more suitable for the people you know - and so we must

pray that it will help a number of people draw closer to commitment to Christ.

And I trust, too, that the last Vision Sunday gave many of us a renewed heart to pray hard for people we know, who don't yet know Christ.

We'll certainly keep going with our focus on evangelism through this year.

But starting right now we also need a vision for this coming year in which we're preparing to take the Big Step of planting a church.

Don't worry: you won't be hearing about Next Big Step in every single sermon this year - but it's right to begin the year with a vision for what lies ahead of us - and that's what today, and in fact also the next two Sundays, will set out.

And the best vision for a church family to have is not a vision about ourselves, is it - it's a vision about God.

If our vision is about ourselves, then we're like a tight-rope walker who makes the bad mistake of looking down, and suddenly forgets that the rope is holding him up and that he can walk across, because all he can see is how far he could fall.

(As Butch Cassidy said to the Sundance Kid: "It's not the fall that kills you - it's the sudden stop at the bottom".)

Instead what the tight-rope walker has got to do is fix his eyes forwards, on the end of the rope, where it's securely fixed on the other side.

And for us our beginning and our end and our only security is our Lord God. When the realities of church-planting give you the jitters - and, if they haven't yet, they sure will this year - it's our looking forward, our eyes fixed on the Lord who upholds us - it's that vision that will sustain us.

This morning I'm preaching from a part of the first letter of the apostle Peter - because it contains a remarkable image of just this: of God, and of what he's doing.

So I suggest that you open up the Bible 1 Peter chapter 2.

Look there at verse 4 [READ verses 4-5].

What is God doing? God is building people into a spiritual house

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or, you could also say: he's building the people who come to Christ into a spiritual household - a spiritual family.

If we're going to be gripped by this vision of a spiritual house the way we should be, then we need to remember the background to it in the Old Testament.

The story of the Old Testament is a story of God choosing a particular group of people - starting with the family of the man called Abraham, which grew into the nation called Israel - and of how God chose them particularly as the place where his presence on earth would be.

The great symbol of his presence with them was the stones on which he had carved the 10 Commandments - and especially the beautiful box, called the ark of the covenant, which these stones were kept in.

The ark was a symbol - just like an engagement ring - whenever an engaged woman looks at it she's reminded of the promise to marry - so the ark of the covenant was a physical reminder of God's promise to be with his people.

When God's people weren't yet settled, and were wandering nomads, God gave them instructions to build an elaborate tent, called the tabernacle, for the ark to live in.

And later when they were settled, and had built Jerusalem as their capital city, they built a beautiful stone temple to house the ark.

That great temple was the sign that God was with his people.

Of course, spiritually-minded people in Old Testament times knew that God didn't live in a box, or in a building - these things symbolised his spiritual presence with his people.

And when Jesus Christ came, he made that spiritual presence a living reality. He was God himself, walking and talking. And when he ascended into heaven, he poured the Holy Spirit into the life of every one of his followers.

Do you see how the apostle Peter picks all of that imagery up so powerfully?

Christ is the living Stone - not a lifeless temple housing God's presence - but the person of God himself.

And all of Christ's followers are 'living stones', because the presence of God in the world is now in the body of people who belong to Jesus Christ because they've put their trust in him.

The followers of Christ are now God's temple - his dwelling-place on earth.

The followers of Christ are now the body of Christ - because his Spirit is in us if we keep coming to him.

At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, God promises that he will renew his creation - and his presence and power and love will fill and transform every part of it.

But for now he's given the world a foretaste of that great day - just as an engagement ring is meant to be a foretaste of a fulfilled marriage.

And that foretaste is... us - everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ.

Just as the temple-building was a foretaste of the living Christ, so we who trust in Christ are meant to be a foretaste to the world around us of the great future when God transforms every part of his world.

So what is God doing? He's building a people who will be the place where he dwells ever more fully.

Verse 4 here says: "As you come to him, you are being built...".

How do we keep coming to Christ? By coming daily to the Bible with open hearts - by coming to him in persistent prayer and praise

- and as we keep coming to him we our cemented more strongly into the spiritual household he's building.

This gives us a profound vision for Next Big Step, and planting a new church.

First, it's a vision to hold us together when things get tough, as they will.

One of the big problems that the early Christian churches faced - churches like the ones Peter was writing to - was disunity - disunity between Christians who'd started life as Jews, apparently born into God's people - and, on the other hand, Christians who were just ordinary Gentiles - who had been adopted as God's children.

Lots of the letters in the New Testament were written to get these two groups to see that they shouldn't either get on their high horse, or shouldn't let other Christians look down on them.

Peter wrote this letter to churches across a big area - and he probably gave them this picture of being a spiritual house to remind them that, whoever they were, and whatever their background, they were all part of the same house, all of them built on the foundation stone of Jesus Christ.

That's what he quotes to them from the Old Testament about Christ, isn't it - verse 6 [READ]. Christ is that corner foundation-stone - the stone laid down first of all - and the whole spiritual household of Christian believers rests on him.

The fact is, isn't it, that a house needs all its bricks. If a few bricks decide to opt out, the house may not fall down - but there'll be a great hole in the wall, that lets the outside elements in.

In the coming year you will hear me say constantly that Next Big Step involves everyone.

And in this image of the spiritual house that God is building, he shows us a profound reason why that is true.

Let me tell you when I think that we're particularly going to have to remember this, in the coming year.

Starting now, about every six weeks we're going to have a Church-Family Night on a Thursday evening. Each evening will be about preparing us to church-plant - there'll be training in ministry, discussions, and prayer.

(These evenings will replace our existing pattern of Prayer Evenings, for a while.

You may remember, when we started our Prayer Evenings a while ago I called them 'Powerpoint Prayer'. I took so much stick about that as a terrible name that I dropped it. Over Christmas we went with my Mum to the church she goes to, and I saw in their notice-sheet that they're about to start a prayer meeting - and they're calling it "Powerpoint".

I thought, "Yes - vindicated - it wasn't such a bad name." I mentioned this to the person sitting next to me, who said, "We like

the idea of praying, but it's a terrible name, isn't it." I just nodded and agreed.)

Now these Church-Family Nights will need all of us to be there - whether you currently like the idea of planting or not - whether you think you'll be staying here, or joining the church-plant.

When we had the church-family night last November we each wrote what we felt about Next Big Step on a paper 'brick'.

But you see, don't you, that actually we are the bricks that God is using to build with.

We don't know for certain just what God will choose to build in the new church-plant, or what he will do as he continues to build here at 'home base'. But the fact is that he is building, and every single one who trusts in Christ is needed to make the spiritual building the best it can be.

And, second, this vision of God building a spiritual house, a family of believers in Christ, is a vision to remind us why we're church-planting in the first place.

Look at verse 9 [READ verses 9-12].

God has made us his people so that we can declare his praises.

So that we can tell people that life without him is darkness, compared to the wonderful light of knowing him.

So that we can tell them the good news... not in the end the news of how great church is, or of how happy Jesus makes us, or of how to be a better person - but the great news of his mercy.

And God has made us his people so that we can live such good lives in his world that some people will see that it's not that we're wonderful, but that a wonderful God has transformed us.

And then they'll praise God for themselves.

Quite simply, planning to plant a church is a great way to refresh ourselves, and to break open even more of the good things that we believe God has given us here, so that the Lord can share them with others, who as yet barely know anything about him.

So planting a church, and re-visioning what we do here, is not change for the sake of change.

It's not about making ourselves feel good that at least we've got some life here.

It's about being prepared to do anything, change anything, go anywhere - if it will allow more people to encounter God's spiritual household, to see what God does in people's lives - and themselves be built into God's growing spiritual household.

It's been great to baptise Charlie today. And we've bought this baptistry not to wheel it out for one person a year - but to see it used again and again.

God is building people into a spiritual house, in which he lives.

There will be ups and downs - there'll be joys and frustrations with each other and even with God. But our task is to keep working with him, as he does this great work of building.