

“WITH CHRIST AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH”

Hebrews 12:2

A few years ago Sally and I had the opportunity of spending a couple of weeks in the south of France looking after a little French Reformed Church while the pastor was away on holiday. It was in a wonderfully picturesque fishing village close to the Spanish border, a place called Collioure. It's a beautiful place, built up the side of a hill where the Pyrenees slope down into the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean. There's a little bay, bounded by a small castle on one side and a Romanesque church on the other, the space in between filled with little shops and cafes, some of them full of paintings by Picasso and Braque and others who would paint a picture for the owner rather than pay their tabs in cash.

The main street runs up from the beach, on which there are brightly coloured traditional fishing boats, and right at the top of the street is the church, with a flat above it (in which we stayed) and a terrace full of brightly coloured flowers. It was wonderful to sit out there in the evening, watching the activity of the village below, listening to the chatter of the birds and insects, and trying hard to discern whether God was calling me to a ministry in that part of the world. Alas, however hard I prayed, he wasn't!

I said the church was right at the top of the hill. In fact it wasn't quite. Looming above the church, and slightly to one side, was a large crucifix which had been put there at some point in the nineteenth century by the Roman Catholic priest, who wasn't about to let the Protestants claim the moral or geographical high ground. It didn't help that when, during a fierce storm one day, the crucifix was blown down, the Protestant minister gleefully ran to the priest's house to inform him that his "monstrous idol was destroyed"! Happily it was replaced and it watches over the village, visible from more or less every angle. Every morning when we woke up and threw back the shutters, there was the image of the crucified Christ in the centre of our view – always there, always in sight.

Whatever your thoughts about statues and crucifixes, there's a powerful reminder there of what we've just read – "*Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus.*" Those of you who worship here regularly will know that we have encapsulated the vision for our development project in the line, "*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.*" Over the past few months we've reflected on many occasions on what it means to be a "*church at the heart of the city*" – a fellowship of God's people that is at the heart of Lichfield geographically, demographically, ethically, culturally, ecumenically and evangelistically. We have talked about the ways in which new buildings and enhanced facilities will enable us to realise that vision more effectively. We have looked to the future with hope and enthusiasm, whilst drawing on the very best of the traditions and practices of the past. But we must not forget the second part of that slogan – "*with Christ at the heart of the church.*" Without that, not only does the first part not make sense, but we'd be wasting our time trying to do anything about it.

So we need to recognise that Jesus Christ is at the very heart of our life together as a church. As his people here we are to ensure that he is the focus of all that we do, he is the one to whom our attention is drawn at all times. He is the hub from which everything else takes its structure, the beating heart that gives life to our activity. And if we are truly focussed on him, if we are always looking towards him, then others will find their gaze drawn to him. When I was a kid, there was a man in our church – a good local preacher and a great friend of our family – called Percy Kimber. Percy worked in a gentleman's outfitters at the top of the High Street in Winchester, in a shop called Basticks, which was frequented by the rather more discerning gentlemen of the town. He was never exactly rushed off his feet, and when he got bored, he would go and stand outside the shop, on the High Street pavement, and stare intently up at a point somewhere in the middle distance. After a while, other people would stop and look up to see what he was looking at, and before long others would join in. Once there was a little crowd looking up into the sky or at some harmless pigeon on a roof, or whatever, Percy would slip back into the shop and watch through the window to see how long they'd stay there, staring at nothing in particular. We're called to focus intently on Christ – and that should be so obvious in our lives and in our activity and in our attitudes, that other people will want to know what it's all about. Remember what Jesus said in the

Sermon on the Mount? “*Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”

So the writer of this letter to the scattered Hebrew Christians emphasises this, and interestingly enough, does it in the context of writing about discipline – about God’s discipline of his people and our disciplining of ourselves in terms of training and endurance. What he is saying in these words about fixing our eyes on Jesus is that we need to sort out our priorities and focus on what’s important. Yes, this development is important because it is in doing this that we are providing a context in which to put into practice what we believe about Christ and his mission. But the most important thing is not the building – nor even the mission – but Christ himself, and he should be firmly and clearly at the heart of our life together and of our lives together.

In the previous sentence he has exhorted his readers to “*throw off everything that hinders and every sin that so easily entangles.*” We probably would like to think that we’re trying to get the sin thing under control. After all, we know what the sins are and there are pretty clear guidelines in the Bible about stealing, adultery, lying, violence and so on. But there are plenty of other things that hinder – things that aren’t sins as such, that might actually be perfectly OK in some contexts and for some people, but they are hindering our attempts to fulfil the mission which has been entrusted to us. Of course, there are fine lines to be drawn here, but we need to recognise when things are starting to get in the way of our doing what Jesus wants us to. That applies to us as individual Christians and it applies to us as a church. We need to cut through all the talk and activism and re-discover the relationship that we are to have with Christ. He is our focus. It is on him that we fix our eyes.

The Canadian psychiatrist and author, John White, writes in his book *The Fight* that “*A Christian is a one-priority person.*” And he goes on to talk about people who say, “*I’m a psychiatrist who also happens to be a Christian.*” (You can substitute your own occupation for psychiatrist, of course.) What we should be saying, he argues is, “*I’m a Christian who happens to be a psychiatrist.*” What defines us as the people of God, as the members of Wade Street Church, is not our daily occupation, but our desire to fix our eyes upon Jesus. I mention this so often that most of you are probably heartily sick of it, but for those who may be new or who have forgotten, let me ask you once again – what are your priorities in life and how does your management of your time and your resources reflect that? What are our priorities as a church, and how will this new development reflect that? We’ve answered that question many times in the past few months and I believe we are all united in believing that this project will enable us better to worship God and better to serve the community as he has called us.

And we fix our eyes upon Jesus, we focus on him we put him at the very heart of our church, not because, like Percy Kimber, we’re bored and we’ve got nothing better to do, but because he is our example, **OUR MODEL**. The writer of this letter gives us a couple of reasons here why he is such a good model for us to follow. And the rest of the letter is a more detailed exposition of that theme, the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Here he mentions Jesus’ *endurance* – Jesus endured the cross and he endured opposition from others. We follow that example as we daily take up our cross, as we daily make our priority obedience to Jesus and his teaching. As we have seen many times before, that’s tough. Last week we recognised that just getting through life is tough enough, without the extra demands of living a *Christian* life. But Jesus provides us with an example to follow as we put our commitment into practice.

And he also mentions Jesus’ *humiliation* – the shame that he had to undergo from “*sinful men*”. His priorities, his agenda was so radically different from that of the people around him that he was misunderstood, misrepresented, opposed and eventually executed. The Son of God, the Lord of all the Universe, despised and rejected, was nailed naked to a plank of wood and left to die in the heat of the Palestinian noon. Being a church at the heart of the city is not going to be an easy task. There may be misunderstanding, misrepresentation. And with Jesus firmly at the heart of the church there may be opposition from outside as our nineteenth century forbears discovered (and, very probably – as everyone

else has discovered – from within). But if we are to be true to our calling, if we are to live out our vision with authenticity and integrity, then we have an example in Jesus.

Now, if you're like me you can take your models, focus on your heroes and still fail miserably in your attempts to emulate them. However much I concentrated on Eric Martin and Gordon Banks as a youth, I never got anywhere near playing as well as they did. However much I listened to Barrie Perrins or Miles Davis, I could never copy their technique. You need something more than a model: you need a **MOTIVATION**. And that's what Jesus is too. Look at v3. When you find yourself growing weary, losing heart, when the work just gets too much, when the sacrifice seems too much to bear, when we start to wish we'd never even contemplated a development project and wonder whether we misheard God, then look at Jesus.

You see, it's not just what he did that is an inspiration – it's that **he did it for you**. Listen to Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse in *The Message*: “When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he ploughed through. **That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!**” We go over that story week by week, day by day as we read the Bible. We go over that story every time we do as we're doing this morning and take the bread and wine of communion. We see that Jesus was the “*author*”, the pioneer, the trailblazer for our faith. He did it so that we could follow him. He did it for you. Jesus took on himself, voluntarily and lovingly, all the eternal consequences of your sin and mine. He hung there naked and humiliated, the lightning rod for the power of evil, the substitute for our punishment, battling it out with sin and death, so that you and I could have a real hope for the future, so that we could have confidence in the overwhelming love of God, so that we could be restored to that right relationship with him, now and for ever. Could anything else motivate you like that? Can you afford to look anywhere else?

If Christ is not at the heart of this church, then we are wasting our time, not just in this development project, not just in our vision, but in everything we do. Other people, other organisations can provide meeting places, advice, entertainment, community facilities here at the heart of this city – but those organisations cannot do it with the same motivation, the same hope, the same inspiration at the heart of their efforts. Maybe that's why the cinemas, the theatres, the clubs, even some of the pubs that were once dotted around the centre of Lichfield are now gone, but the churches still remain. If we really do focus on Jesus, if we keep him at the heart of our lives and of our church, we will find the strength and the vision to keep going when things get tough, we will have the peace (maybe even the joy) of knowing that we're doing something worthwhile. All the other things will fall into place.

After I'd started to write this earlier in the week I was looking through some of my old sermons, trying to find a quotation (which I didn't find), but I did turn up a sermon that I preached here thirteen years ago to this very Sunday – the first time I ever came here, in fact, when you were trying to suss me out as a potential minister. I'd forgotten all about it, as I expect you have too (those who were here). What was the text? *Hebrews 12:1,2*. The thrust of it was a bit different from today's, but the basic message was the same. If you want to move forward in the path of discipleship, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Maybe he's really trying to tell us something! Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus – and let's keep him at the very heart of this church.