

## **“EVERYDAY DISCIPLES - PRIORITIES”**

### *Jeremiah 29:4-14*

The psychologist Oliver James recently published a book called *Affluenza*. (I think there was a review of it in *Vision* a couple of months ago.) He has a theory that many people, especially in the western world, are afflicted with a virus which he calls “affluenza” – it is, according to him, “*a set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional distress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.*” At the beginning of the book, he sets out a test, a series of questions, to help determine if you have the virus. It includes such questions as:

- I would like to be a very wealthy person
- I would like successfully to hide the signs of ageing
- I like to keep up with fashions in hair and clothing
- Shopping or thinking about what to buy greatly preoccupies me
- My life would be better if I owned certain things I don’t have now

Although Oliver James doesn’t explicitly state it, those are the kind of things that form the **priorities** in our lives. We all have them. Some of us can be quite articulate and purposeful about them: we have career plans, financial plans, projects for the near and distant future, things that are important to us. Many of us probably don’t articulate them in quite the same way, but the ways in which we use our time, energy and resources betray what our priorities really are. For some of us those priorities are as self-directed as the ones I quoted from Oliver James’ list. For others of us they might appear more altruistic – it’s our family that is our priority, we want the best for them: or it’s our community involvement, we want to improve things for those around us. It may even be the church that is our priority. And those priorities, those things that are at the top of our agenda, change over time, as well.

But I wonder what are our priorities as Christians. If we are disciples of Jesus Christ – as we claim to be and as we are thinking about this year – are there particular things that should be on our list of priorities? Are there distinctively Christian priorities? And do our priorities – whether personal or as a church – coincide with what God wants for us?

Knowing that this subject was coming up for our consideration today, I’ve been thinking and praying about it for a few weeks now. I was particularly thinking about it in the 24/7 Prayer Room a couple of weeks ago. As I did so, my attention was drawn to a couple of things that were written on the wall in the Prayer Room. Firstly these words: “*Greater things have yet to come and greater things are still to be done in THIS city.*” My thoughts went to some of the words we have just read from *Jeremiah 29*. And then I read these words: “*Arise, Wade Street, and follow me, says the Lord. I have plans for you. Put your faith in me. Seek my face and I will not fail you. Too many rest on the faith of others. Give my Spirit freedom to work amongst you. Arise, my children, and accept your destiny.*” Again, there are some phrases in that which are strikingly similar to what we have just read. At the end of the week, there were also some things written in the book in the Prayer Room which chimed in well with those words.

So I turned to *Jeremiah 29*. It’s a passage that is familiar to many of us here, I’m sure. We have taken the words of vv5-7 very much to heart as part of our commission here in Lichfield, as “*a church at the heart of the city.*” We are here in this place at this time and we need to get on and make the most of it for the glory of God – through prayer and through action. Many people looking at this passage would home in on v11 and the wonderful promise (emphasised in those words from the prayer wall) that God has plans, a destiny for us – and they are plans full of hope and optimism.

But, as with so many other of the great promises and covenants of God, we often don’t read on. We stop after the promise and before the challenge. In this case, that comes in vv12,13 – particularly in v13. Now, we touched on these words in the very first sermon on discipleship this year, but didn’t really develop it. Look what God says here – “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your*

heart.” Once again, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message* drives the point home with startling clarity. Listen to this. “*When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen. When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.*” That seems to me to be the language of priorities: “*when you want it more than anything else.*” Looking for God. Listening for God. Loving God above all else. Focussing on him. Wanting to do that more than anything else. That is surely the ultimate priority.

And this isn’t the only place in the Bible where you’ll find such language. *1 Chronicles 28:9* is part of another passage that has been important to us here at Wade Street Church – “*If you seek him he will be found by you ...*” Or how about *2 Chronicles 7:14*? “*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*” And from *Hosea 10:12* these words: “*... break your unploughed land; for it is time to seek the LORD until he comes and showers righteousness on you.*” Do we get the message? **Seek God.** Look for him. Put him at the centre of your life. Make him your priority. “*It is time to seek the LORD.*”

You see, while our human priorities shift from time to time, while our priorities as a church seem to move around, right at the heart of it all is God, the unchanging centre in a dislocated, fragmentary, shifting world. Our focus is not to be the Church. Our focus is not to be dogma and doctrine. Our focus is not even to be the Bible, important as it is. Our focus, our priority is to be seeking the God who is behind and beyond all those things. Our priority should be getting to know God better so that we can love him better and serve him more effectively.

God has plans for us – a destiny for us. He has promised us that. That applies to each of us personally and it applies to us as a church, a company of his disciples. The question is: do we want to fulfil that destiny? We cannot do that unless we seek God. Notice what he says in the promise of *v11*: “*I know the plans I have for you ...seek me ...*” He doesn’t tell his people – us, his disciples – to seek the plans. Don’t make the projects and the programmes the priority, however much we might be tempted to do that. And, of course, it’s only natural for us to do that: we want to know what’s going to happen, we want to be prepared, we want to know how much of ourselves we will have to invest in it all. God says, “Seek me. That’s all you need to do to start with. I will show you what is to happen when you want that more than anything else. And by then, you will be so close to me that anything I ask will be easy for you to discern and to give.”

Let me try and sum up what we’ve said so far in a few words. What we need is a renewed and deepened devotion to God himself, a renewed and revived love for him. If we went round this room this morning and asked each person whether they loved God I’m sure that pretty well everyone would say yes. Of course we love God. That’s why we’re here. That’s what helps us keep going when we remember it. But if we were to ask if we wanted to love God **more than anything else**, we might need a bit of time to think about it. You see before Jesus told Simon Peter what he wanted him to do (“*feed my lambs*”), he asked him if he loved him – three times!

And look back at the first reading we heard this morning – Paul’s words to the Corinthian Christians. We know from what he writes elsewhere in his letters to Corinth that Paul had had a pretty torrid time. He was under enormous pressure both with the proclamation of the gospel in new and often dangerous places and also with the pastoral concern that he had for his recent converts. He had to cope with all kinds of attacks on him – physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual. There was plenty going on in his situation that might have led him to take his eyes off Jesus. Yet he reminds his readers that all those notions of wisdom, status, influence and so on are not what it’s about (*1 Corinthians 1:26-29*). And he tells them in *2:2* that he had only one overwhelming desire – “*to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” Here is Paul, the great missionary, the exemplary pastor, the towering theologian of the Early Church – and he has one desire: to put God in the very centre of his thoughts. And once his focus was correct, all the other things fell into place.

One of the things that was written down in the 24/7 Prayer Room (I can't remember now if it was on the wall or in the book) was a word saying that we should put less emphasis on activity and more on loving God and getting to know him better. There's a heck of a lot of activity that happens here each week, most of which involves only a few of us at a time. But I wonder how often we pause and reflect on why we are doing it. Is the priority doing the activity – or loving the God who is behind it all? Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California and a prolific writer on Christian devotion, wrote a book a couple of years ago called *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' essential teaching on discipleship*. His main concern is that the Church today is occupied with making Christians not disciples. And he quotes in one of the chapters someone who said that the greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ. In other words, we get so taken up with what we are doing for Christ that we completely forget the reason for it – our love for Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that “*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (*Matthew 6:21*). In other words, as we said earlier on, you can tell a person's real priority by what they put into it. If your whole life is taken up with your job, that's your priority. If most of your money goes on clothes, that's your priority. If all your energy goes into your sports club, that's your priority. If all your spare time is spent watching television, that's your priority. But if you are beginning to bring God into everything you do, if you find yourself praying to him throughout the day, if you are using the material blessings God has showered on you to further the purposes of his Kingdom, then just maybe you are starting to make him your priority. Invest in God, Focus on him. Seek to get to now him better.

Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “*Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened*” (*Matthew 7:7,8*). Now that's not, I believe, a basis for asking for anything and everything and expecting God to give it to you. You can't base some kind of heretical “Name-It-And-Claim-It” theology on those words. If you look at the same episode in Luke gospel (*Luke 11:9ff*), you'll see that Jesus is talking about receiving more of God's Holy Spirit, of seeking God by wanting more of him.

How many of us have asked God for more of his Holy Spirit? How many of us have prayed that we'd be drawn closer to God? How many of us have wanted God to work powerfully in our lives to his praise and glory? Quite a few over the years, I would imagine. We have sought God. We have wanted him to be a part of our lives. But have you really sought him **with all your heart**? Have you really wanted him **more than anything else**? How many of us have **begged** God for more of his Holy Spirit? How many of us have **earnestly** prayed that we'd be drawn closer to God? How many of us have **consistently** wanted God to work powerfully in our lives to his praise and glory? When it comes to priorities in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, then there can be no argument – it's all or nothing. Are you really up for that?

*Disussion notes on next page*

**"EVERYDAY DISCIPLES – PRIORITIES"**  
***Jeremiah 29:4-14; 1 Corinthians 1:26 – 2:5***

We all have priorities in our lives. Some of us are very clear about what they are. Many of us probably aren't quite so clear, but the ways in which we use our time, energy and resources betray what our priorities really are. What are our priorities as Christians? Are there distinctively Christian priorities? And do our priorities – whether personal or as a church – coincide with what God wants for us?

In *Jeremiah 29:13* we read, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." ["When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed." The Message] That is the language of priorities: loving God above all else. Focussing on him. Wanting to do that more than anything else. That is surely the ultimate priority. (Look also at *1 Chronicles 28:9*, *2 Chronicles 7:14* and *Hosea 10:12*.)

You see, while our human priorities shift from time to time, while our priorities as a church seem to move around, right at the heart of it all is God, the unchanging centre in a dislocated, fragmentary, shifting world. Our focus is not to be the Church. Our focus is not to be dogma and doctrine. Our focus is not even to be the Bible, important as it is. Our focus, our priority, is to be seeking the God who is behind and beyond all those things. Our priority should be getting to know God better so that we can love him better and serve him more effectively.

Notice what God says in the promise of *v11*: "**I know the plans I have for you ...seek me ...**" He doesn't tell his people to seek the plans, projects and programmes. God says, "Seek me. That's all you need to do to start with. I will show you what is to happen when you want that more than anything else. And by then, you will be so close to me that anything I ask will be easy for you to discern and to give." What we need is a renewed and deepened devotion to God himself, a renewed and revived love for him. Before Jesus told Simon Peter what he wanted him to do, he asked him if he loved him – three times! (*John 21:15ff*) St Paul was under enormous pressure both with the proclamation of the gospel in new and often dangerous places and also with the pastoral concern that he had for his recent converts. He had to cope with all kinds of attacks on him – physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual. There was plenty going on in his situation that might have led him to take his eyes off Jesus. Yet he reminds his readers that all those notions of wisdom, status, influence and so on are not what it's about (*1 Corinthians 1:26-29*). And he tells them in *2:2* that he had only one overwhelming desire – "to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Maybe we should put less emphasis on activity and more on loving God and getting to know him better. "*The greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ.*" (Dallas Willard) In other words, we get so taken up with what we are doing for Christ that we completely forget the reason for it – our love for Christ. Jesus says that "*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (*Matthew 6:21*). Later on he says, "*Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened*" (*Matthew 7:7,8*). Jesus is talking about receiving more of God's Holy Spirit, of seeking God by wanting more of him (see *Luke 11:9ff*). When it comes to priorities in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, then there can be no argument – it's all or nothing.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. The words we read from the Old Testament were written to particular people at a specific time and place in history. Is it legitimate to apply them to ourselves today? Why/why not?
2. What do you think are the main priorities in most people's lives today? Is it actually any different for Christians? Why do you think that?
3. What do we actually mean by "*seeking God*"? How do we know when we've found him?
4. How can we demonstrate in our everyday lives what our priorities are as Christians? What problems might that cause? What good might come of it?
5. How, as a local church, could we put God more at the centre of our life together? Should we close down all our activities for a while? Why/why not?
6. What helps you to keep God as a priority in your life?