

“AMAZING THINGS”
Habakkuk 1:1-11 (Malachi 3:10; Joshua 3:5)

Back in 1983, the Irish singer Van Morrison released an album with the title *Inarticulate Speech Of The Heart*. I'm afraid that's what this morning's sermon may seem like to some of you – and for that I apologise. But I hope that what we have to say this morning will encourage and challenge you, as it has me over the past few days and weeks as the various thoughts have been whirling round in my head. There are a number of things that I believe God has been saying to me, to us, recently, things about what we're doing here and what he is doing, things about where we're going and where God is leading us. They've been expressed in all sorts of ways and I want to try and pull some of them together this morning as we follow on from what Liz said to us last week in that wonderful sermon about setting off again on the path that has been marked out for us.

And it is there that I discovered the catalyst, if you like, for my “Inarticulate speech of the heart”. You can read a passage from the Bible any number of times and not really notice certain things. It wasn't until I was actually up here reading *Joshua 3* last week before Liz preached on it that I was really struck by v5. In the midst of all the preparation for moving on that God was telling the people about through Joshua, we read these words: “*Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.*” We'll come back to those words in a bit, but they summed up for me things that have been buzzing around for years in my mind – and, if the conversations I've had with several of you and that we have had at Elders' Meetings are anything to go by, I know they have been buzzing around in many of your minds too.

You see, the Bible tells us – and I really believe this too (as no doubt you'd expect me to, if it's in the Bible) – that God is always wanting to do great things among his people. And remember, in all that we have to say this morning, it's about God, not us – **he** wants to do great things. We have a powerful, an awesome God. We pay lip service to that in our songs and prayers, but we're not always quite ready to experience it in our own situations. While we might praise God for what he is doing in other places and hear stories of miracles and wonders that other people experience, we aren't quite ready to believe that God can do that here, in this place, at this time. Our horizons can be somewhat limited. We believe we have a vision, but we have (probably quite unconsciously) set limits on what can be achieved, on what can happen. That's possibly because we are thinking of what *we* are going to do, rather than what **God** is going to do.

And we can easily end up like the prophet Habakkuk, from whose little prophecy we read this morning. Our prayers and our conversations are more often than not full of complaint and regret. Now that has its place – don't get me wrong – but there's a heck of a lot more to it than that. But so often our prayers are along the lines of “Lord, help us out here” or “Lord, get us out of this mess” or “Lord, what are we going to do about this?” than “Show your power, O Lord” or, as Habakkuk himself prays later in this little book, “*I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Renew them in our day*” (3:2).

Are we close to something special happening here? Is God preparing us for a demonstration of his deeds? Do we sense that there are great things just around the corner? I do, and I have felt that for some time, as we'll see in a bit. God is at work among us here in Lichfield, here in this congregation. He has given us resources, people and a sense of longing. And he has given us a vision of what we want us to be here in this place – “*A church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church.*” That vision is gradually being fulfilled. It is happening. Despite the number of Christian leadership conferences and seminars I've been on – most of which, it has to be said, draw their inspiration more from the world of big business than from the Bible – I am not one of those who believe that you have to cast a fresh vision every couple of years. Look back through the Bible and you'll see that the visions that God's people had – be it for the settling of the Promised Land, the building of the Temple or the evangelisation of the Gentiles around the Mediterranean – took years to fulfil. And often the people with original vision – Moses, David, Paul – didn't get to see the culmination of it. God's vision to bless the world through his choice of the Jewish people is still ongoing, more than five millennia after he first shared it with

Abraham. Yes, there always things to be done, more effective ways of doing them, ways in which we have to adapt and move forward. But the vision is still there: use the position of the church here to let this city know that Jesus is alive and makes a difference. Let's not waste our time and energy looking for a new vision, but try, with God's help, to fulfil this one.

So I'd just like to us to consider this morning three instances from the Old Testament where God promised great things to his people and how his people were to prepare themselves for that. I'm not going to go into all the background this morning – you don't really want to know about pre-exilic and post-exilic hopes and fears, about the history of the dynasties of the Ancient world, about the lives of the prophets. But trust me – I don't think I've just wrenched these verses out of context to make a point.

1. LOOK AROUND YOU (*Habakkuk 1:5*)

Let's start with the verses we read together a few moments ago. The prophet was moaning on at God (with some justification) about the way God seemed to have let his people down. It appeared that he was allowing evil to go unpunished and injustice was rife. At least, he couldn't see how God was going to restore his rule to the nation of Judah. In the end, God used a pagan power, the ruthless Babylonians, to bring about his purposes – something that was really beyond the comprehension of his people. And he tells Habakkuk just to have a look round, then he would see that God was at work – and at work in a way that Habakkuk and his fellow-countrymen would have difficulty believing.

Look around! Can't you see that God is at work? When I was preparing for this morning, I did what I often do and looked back through the files to see if I'd preached on this before and, if I had, whether there any insights I could take from that sermon to help me prepare for this. As it happens, I was surprised to see that we looked at this passage almost exactly ten years ago – as we started to get ready for the autumn programme in 1999. That morning I said, "God is going to surprise us." I believe that, if we look around today and compare it with the situation then, he has. It's just happened rather gradually. Let me just ask you to put up your hand if you have joined this church since 1999. And those of you who were here in 1999, think about what has happened since then – the Alpha courses that have been run, the baptisms that have taken place, God's gracious provision of £520,000, these new buildings, a children's worker, an administrator, two youth workers, a second minister, all the children and young people who have been here this morning, all the people who have just put up their hands! Is that amazing, or what?

There's a very sobering verse in Matthew gospel about Jesus' ministry in his home town. He preached a bit, but nothing much else happened and Matthew comments, "*He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith*" (*Matthew 13:58*). They didn't believe he could do anything, so he didn't. We can see what God has done here. Surely that should give us real confidence to believe he can do even greater things here. Look around and see what he's done.

2. DEVOTE YOUR RESOURCES TO GOD (*Malachi 3:10*)

So to Malachi. God has given us an abundance of resources as a church. And he has given all of us personally an abundance of resources. He is a generous God and we here, in this particular part of the world, have experienced his generosity in material terms to a much greater extent than the vast majority of the population of this earth. The people to whom Malachi was speaking in the sixth century BC had been through all the stuff Habakkuk was foretelling and were now back in their own land, enjoying the privileges of plenty once again. But all was not well. God had blessed them and they had said, effectively, "Thank you very much. We'll enjoy all that" and got on and enjoyed it without really responding as God wanted them to. He asked them to devote a tenth of it to him and they just got on and kept all of it for themselves. If they did offer anything back to God it was the bits they didn't want because they were spoiled – diseased animals for sacrificed and the like.

So, through Malachi, God says to them, “*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse ... Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room to store it*” (Malachi 3:10). This is most emphatically **not** a justification for the so-called “prosperity gospel” – give a lot to God **so that** he will give you even more. Our motivation for giving to God is not what he *will do*, but what he *has done*. Giving is our response to him, not our bargaining tool for getting him to give us something more. God has provided us with so much in simply material terms, but he has, above all, given us the promise of eternal salvation through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. Because of that, if for no other reason, we devote what we have to God.

Because of what God has done – because of the way in which he has blessed us as a church with resources, with buildings, with gifted people, with all kinds of amazing things – we are to use those very things for him and for his work. And if we are faithful stewards of all that, then there are even more wonderful things to follow. Many of you, I know, gave sacrificially to enable these premises to be built and developed. And, as many of you will know, at almost the same time as we paid off the final instalment of the loan, we received news of a large legacy from someone no-one here could remember. God opens the floodgates and showers his blessing on us. And I reckon that the floodgates are only really just ajar at the moment. If we are faithful in using what he has given us – as a church and as individuals – then there are blessings he is waiting to give us that we cannot even begin to plan for it. The elders will be spending all their time at meetings working out how best to make use of what God showers on us. Stephen Packham’s graphs will go up the wall and across the ceiling. So think carefully and pray fervently about how you, how we, use all that God has already so graciously given us – including our own lives.

3. CONSECRATE YOURSELVES (*Joshua 3:5*)

Which brings us back to the words with which I began this “inarticulate speech of the heart”: *Joshua 3:5*. As Liz told us last week, here are God’s people on the brink of the greatest thing that was ever to happen to them (and, it has to be said, the cause of a fair bit of warfare and violence over the past few thousand years). They were about to step into the land God had promised them and settle down in a place that was, for most of them, the stuff of legend. It wasn’t going to be easy, but it was wonderfully exciting. They didn’t really know what to expect, but they knew it was going to be amazing.

But the night before they stepped over the River Jordan, they were called upon to “*consecrate themselves*”, they were to take the opportunity to get themselves right with God and renew their commitment to him. Notice that it doesn’t say “*Consecrate yourselves SO THAT the LORD will do amazing things ...*” but “*Consecrate yourselves FOR the LORD WILL do amazing things ...*” God was going to do amazing things and he wanted them to be ready for it. It had happened once before – just before they met with God at the foot of Mount Sinai – and that had involved washing themselves and their clothes as a way of symbolically expressing their desire to be pure and holy. Once they’ve done that, there are amazing things in store once again.

We’ve done this before, too. We’ve had times when, as a church and as individuals, we have re-committed ourselves to God. But we need to keep it up to date. I’ll say it again – I believe God has amazing things in store for us here. He’s shown us before that he can do it. He’s given us a vision of how we might be involved in that. God is just waiting to pour out his Holy Spirit on us and on this city. But he wants us to be ready. He wants us to consecrate ourselves so that we can really make the most of what he has to give us. Remember, this is about him – about his power, his grace, his generosity. It’s not about us. We are not trying to bribe him into showing his power. He’s going to do it anyway, but if we are prepared, we won’t get the full effect of it.

If we are to be prepared for God’s amazing things, we need first of all to pause and consider those things we are doing that are not in line with what he requires of us. It’s easy to slip into the wrong ways, to find ourselves sliding away from God’s paths. It’s easy, in short, to sin. So we need to repent, to

acknowledge that we have done wrong, that our actions and attitudes need attention, and ask for God's forgiveness.

We need to re-commit ourselves to living lives of prayer and holiness, lives that are connected to God and characterised by integrity. That's partly what the Youth & Children's Work Team have been doing this morning. But for that we need the help of the Holy Spirit. As we find parts of our lives that were inhabited by sinful habits and thought patterns are left empty when we repent, then it's vital that we invite the Holy Spirit to inhabit those places to prevent other unhelpful things creeping in and taking up residence.

And we need to ask that same Holy Spirit to open our eyes to look around at what God has already done, at what he is doing, at what he is going to do, so that we don't miss it or put it down to something else. God has amazing things in store for us – I really do believe that. We haven't seen the half of what he can do. He has been preparing us for it and he is moving us on towards it as we stick to that vision he has given us. I don't know exactly what he might do – that's the scary bit – but then nor did Joshua or Habakkuk or Malachi. They just wanted everyone to be ready for it. Are you up for it?

Let's pause for a few moments just to take all that in and ask God how he wants us to respond. Maybe you do need to repent of something. Maybe you do need to re-commit yourself to a life of integrity and holiness. Maybe you do need to be given the faith to believe that God is going to do great things. Maybe you know that you need more of God's Holy Spirit in your life. Maybe you are just totally confused by it all. Use these few moments to think and pray.

In a moment I'm going to lead us in a prayer. I'm not going to ask you to come down to the front, but I am going to ask you to show that you want to take this seriously by standing up, if you want to. Often, when preachers do this they ask everyone to look down and keep their eyes closed. But this morning I want you to look around as you stand. Look and see that you're not the only one – God is building up his living stones into a spiritual house. God is starting, even now, to do amazing things. So, please, if you don't want to miss out on it all, prepare yourself for what God is going to do. *“Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.”*

(Discussion notes & questions on next page)

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We consider three instances from the Old Testament where God promised great things to his people and how his people were to prepare themselves for that.

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Habakkuk was complaining to God about the way he seemed to have let his people down. It appeared that he was allowing evil to go unpunished and injustice was rife. In the end, God used a pagan power, the ruthless Babylonians, to bring about his purposes – something that was really beyond the comprehension of his people. God tells Habakkuk just to have a look round, then he would see that God was at work – and at work in a way that Habakkuk and his fellow-countrymen would have difficulty believing.

2. DEVOTE YOUR RESOURCES TO GOD (*Malachi 3:10*)

The people to whom Malachi was speaking had been through all the stuff Habakkuk was foretelling and were now back in their own land, enjoying the privileges of plenty once again. God had blessed them and they had got on and enjoyed it without really responding as God wanted them to. He asked them to devote a tenth of it to him and they kept all of it for themselves. If they did offer anything back to God it was the bits they didn't want because they were spoiled (look at *1:8,13,14*). So, through Malachi, God says to them the words in *3:10*. Remember, our motivation for giving to God is not what he **will do**, but what he **has done**. Giving is our response to him, not our bargaining tool for getting him to give us something more.

3. CONSECRATE YOURSELVES (*Joshua 3:5*)

God's people were about to step into the land God had promised them and settle down in a place that was, for most of them, the stuff of legend. It wasn't going to be easy, but it was wonderfully exciting. They didn't really know what to expect, but they knew it was going to be amazing. The night before they stepped over the River Jordan, they were called upon to "*consecrate themselves*"; they were to take the opportunity to get themselves right with God and renew their commitment to him. Notice that it doesn't say "*Consecrate yourselves SO THAT the LORD will do amazing things ...*" but "*Consecrate yourselves FOR the LORD WILL do amazing things ...*" God was going to do amazing things and he wanted them to be ready for it.

If we are to be prepared for God's amazing things, we need to repent, to re-commit ourselves to living lives of prayer and holiness, and to ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to look around at what God has already done, at what he is doing, at what he is going to do.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways can you see that God has been at work in your life, in the life of the church and in the life of the community? How does that make you feel?
2. How can we best devote our resources to God? What do we mean by "resources"? Think of your own resources and the resources of the church?
3. Why do you think God wanted the people of Israel to consecrate themselves to him? (Look at *Exodus 19:10-15* to see what it entailed at Sinai.)
4. How can we consecrate ourselves to God? Is it something we do once and for all or should we be doing it more often?
5. Use your imagination and think of some of the things God might be wanting to do in this community. To what extent is God dependent on our response to him?