

“... WITH CHRIST AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH”

John 20:19-23

Over the next few weeks we're going to remind ourselves of the things that we try to stick to as a church here in the centre of Lichfield, looking at our mission statement and vision, and reflecting on what they mean and what we are doing about them. The vision of the church, the mission which we believe we are here to fulfil, is on our weekly notice sheet, on the back of *Vision* and on the walls of most of the rooms in this church. There's a longer section about looking "*upwards in worship, forward to growth and maturity and outwards in care, concern and evangelism*", which was formulated around twenty years ago, and we'll look at that from next week onwards. This morning we're going to have a brief look at the shorter statement, which we felt summed up what we were about when we embarked on our development project about ten years ago – "*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.*"

In fact, an article about that appeared in *Vision* in March 2002 and I preached on it one Sunday almost exactly ten years ago. I don't think that when Liz suggested we look at it again she realised quite how significant a time this is. We looked then at the ways in which this church should be at the heart of the city of Lichfield, at the centre of the life of this community. We thought about it being at the heart:

Geographically in its position right by the shops, offices, theatre and council headquarters:

Demographically in reflecting a broad cross-section of the population of Lichfield:

Theologically & ethically with people from this church serving prophetically as the conscience of various other organisations and enterprises in the city:

Ecumenically as a bunch of people who were prepared to work with and give a lead to Christians from other churches in Lichfield:

Culturally as we opened our buildings to various artistic and cultural groups and encouraged people from the congregation to get involved in local projects:

Socially by reaching out to other groups and individuals who needed help in different ways, and

Evangelistically as we witnessed by our lives as well as our words.

Much of that has been going on for several years now. We've seen all kinds of things happening on these premises – Alpha, the Monday lunches, Messy Church, Songs of Praise, Soul Street and so on – and we have been able to encourage the members in all kinds of involvement in the life of the wider community. We get involved as a church in such things as The Lichfield Mysteries, The Bower Day and the Fuse Festival, Christmas Day Together, Late Night Listeners, and individuals work as school governors, Cruse counsellors, mentors, volunteers in all kinds of situations. The church is well known and well respected in the city. In 2006 the incoming Mayor asked me to act as his chaplain for the year, not because of anything about me but because, as he said at the time, Wade Street Church was a great example of getting involved in the community and making a positive difference. I looked back at that article and sermon and there was one paragraph which I'd forgotten which appears in both. Let me just read it to you on this first Sunday that we are holding two morning services.

*“My dream for the church is that it would be a place which functions very much at the heart of the city and is alive with activity every day as different people and different groups meet on the site. The use of the church would mean that other people are drawn to the community of believers who form the core, and the number of committed believers would be constantly growing – and those believers would be becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ. **There might even need to be more than one service on a Sunday** (maybe at different times or in different places) and services on different days of the week [Messy Church] ... and the Holy Spirit would be clearly seen to be at work.”*

God has blessed us in all kinds of ways in these past years and we are, I hope, humbly grateful for that. There is still a great deal more to do, though, and that vision is still very much the core of what we do here. Until we have completely fulfilled it – or until God clearly shows us something different – then we stick at it and keep working away at it. That's what drives us as his people here. We can be grateful but not complacent, encouraged but not arrogant, pleased because we are heading in the right direction but

not too comfortable with our situation. We are getting on with the task of being “*A church at the heart of the city ...*”

But the great danger for us is that we forget the second part of the statement – “... *with Christ at the heart of the church.*” That is, in fact, the more important part of the statement of our vision. We are part of the life of this city. We are generally respected, often invited to take part in social and civic life, complimented by leaders and groups beyond the church. We don’t have to battle to be able to witness. We are not persecuted or repressed. We have a very good relationship with many people and groups in Lichfield – with the establishment, even. And that’s the source of temptation. It’s always tempting to sit back and enjoy a cosy relationship with the establishment. We acknowledge Jesus. We say that we want him at the heart of our church. We focus on him – insofar as it’s convenient and expedient. But do we truly follow him?

I’ve been reading a couple of books recently which have brought me up sharp when I’ve tried to apply what they say to our situation here. One is Stuart Murray’s book, *Post-Christendom: Church And Mission In A Strange New World*. Murray looks back at the way the Church became part of the Empire in the time of Constantine and moved from being a radical, marginalised sect in the first three centuries of its existence to being pretty well equated with the Empire – the Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire and then various other empires and nations in the wake of the Reformation (as in The Church of England, for example). It’s a fascinating read. Constantine was a very controversial Caesar and much has written about his motives for accommodating the Church, but there is no doubt that he managed to bring the Church from the very edges of the Empire’s life to the very heart of it.

And that, according to Murray, was when the rot set in. The Church became institutionalised and not only tolerated but privileged, and as a result lost its focus on Jesus. As he writes, “*Jesus was worshipped but not followed ... The Church was now at the centre but Jesus was consigned to the margins.*” In getting to the heart of the Empire, the Church forgot all about its leader and, particularly, his teaching: it forgot why it existed. The book closes with a section entitled *Jesus At The Centre*: I’d love to read it all to you but time forbids this morning. Here’s one key sentence, though: “*The teachings and example of Jesus reveal his priorities and challenge ours.*” Have we, in moving towards the heart of the city, lost any of our radical edge or compromised our commitment to follow Jesus? Have we ceased to speak out prophetically about the sins of our society because we are now so deeply embedded in it ourselves? You may well think we’re OK – fair enough, but we need to keep asking the questions.

You see, when the Church moved to the centre of the Empire, it had to reinterpret a great deal of what Jesus said about riches, for example, as it was now very rich. It had to temper its stance on sexual immorality and corruption and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ for fear of offending the quasi-Christians with whom it now co-operated. It reached a comfortable accommodation with the establishment so that it “had the right to tell them about Jesus” – or about selected parts of the Jesus story.

Tom Sine, in the other book I’ve been reading – *The New Conspirators: Creating The Future One Mustard Seed At a Time* – writes this, quoting from John Alexander: “*Christians spend a lot of time and energy explaining why Jesus couldn’t possibly have meant what he said. This is understandable. Jesus is an extremist, and we are all moderates. What is worse, he was an extremist in his whole life – not just in some narrowly ‘spiritual’ areas ... but in everything.*” We must never allow the first half of that sentence which sums up our vision to cloud the second half, neglecting or ignoring what he really said so that we can stay at the heart of whatever we want. In fact, the second part should always govern the first part. We must in every circumstance keep Jesus Christ at the heart of the church – and keep following his ways, not those of the community around us. In that sense, we must continue to be extremists.

In the passage we’ve just read from John’s Gospel – part of the story of Easter – we read of Jesus being physically at the heart of his group of disciples. In v19 John writes that “*Jesus came and stood among them*” or “*in the midst of them*” or “*at the heart of them*”. Here’s a group of people who really wanted to follow Jesus, but who were themselves standing on the very margins of society – to the extent that they

were hiding because they feared the establishment. But let's look at this story and see what happens when Jesus really is at the heart of his people.

1. HE PROMISED THEM HIS PEACE

Jesus stood at the heart of them and said "*Peace be with you*" (vv19,21). As any scholar will tell you, that was the normal form of greeting at that time – "*Eirene humin*" in Greek or "*Shalom alechem*" in Hebrew – just like "*Good morning*". But Jesus repeats it, emphasising it to his bewildered followers. He emphasises it, I would suggest, for two reasons. Firstly, he wants them to know that he doesn't hold against them the fact that they all deserted him a couple of days earlier. They had heard that he was alive again, but might well have expected him to ignore them or reproach them for having let him down so badly. But no – their relationship with him is secure.

Secondly, he wants them to know that, with him at the heart of their group, they need not fear the Jewish leaders and the others who they think are out to get them because of their links with him. He is promising them his calm and his protection. He has overcome sin, evil and death on the cross and through the empty tomb, so they need not fear a thing. There's a strong echo here of what he said to them in *John 14:27*: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*"

If we restore Jesus to the heart of our lives, if we keep him at the heart of our church, then we too can hang on to that promise of peace, that assurance of Jesus' forgiveness and protection. We can hear his words and not only believe them, but apply them to our own situation.

2. HE SHOWED THEM HIS SCARS

I suspect that when Jesus first turned up – somehow appearing amongst them despite the locked doors – and said "*Peace be with you*", there were some, if not all, of them who couldn't quite believe it was him. In Luke's account of this episode he says they thought they were seeing a ghost, so Jesus lets them know it really is him by showing them his scars (v20). As a minister you get invited to see quite a lot of scars, most of which you'd be quite happy never to have to look at, but this isn't Jesus about to bore his disciples with an account of his recent surgery – this is Jesus reminding them not only who he is, but what he has done for them. He has been executed on their behalf. He has died horribly and humiliatingly to deal with the consequences of their sin – and the sin of all humanity. This is a powerful way of demonstrating his love for them – "Look! I did this for you! This is how much I care about you."

Keeping Jesus at the heart of our lives and our church means that we are reminded constantly of his immense love for us. And reminding ourselves of that – through reading the Bible, in prayer and worship, in receiving the bread and wine at communion and reflecting on what we're doing and why, by sharing together what he has done for us in conversation – will help us to keep him there, too. If we fully grasp the extent of his love, the awe-inspiring nature of his sacrifice, then we have a better chance of ensuring that he is always going to be front and centre of our lives.

3. HE FILLED THEM WITH JOY

As soon as they realised that this was really Jesus, that this person at the heart of their gathering was the one they had assumed, quite naturally, was dead and buried, they were overcome with joy. The presence of Jesus in the midst of them affected them deeply and positively. Their attitude and mood were transformed. If you'd been there just before Jesus arrived and then nipped out to the loo or to the corner shop, when you got back the difference would have been remarkable. Because they now knew that Jesus

was back at the heart of their group they were “*overjoyed*”. Their sadness, fear and confusion were replaced by a deep awareness of the living Lord Jesus and a powerful sense that all was going to be alright. This was a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. It was another fulfilment of Jesus’ words to them, this time in *John 16:22*: “*Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.*”

Having Jesus at the heart of our lives, of our church, means transformation. It means that we do not live our lives as people who fear the future – short-term or eternal. It means that we live our lives with a noticeably positive outlook. It means that we start to see life through the lens of the Kingdom. It doesn’t mean that we suddenly become happy-clappy, chorus singing, all dancing deniers of the pain and grief in the world, but that we start to approach life with a sense of serenity and a strong desire to follow Jesus in living a life that is positive and life-affirming as, with Christ’s help, we deal daily with that pain and grief.

4. HE SENT THEM OUT

Jesus had prayed to his Father about the disciples in *John 17:18*: “*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*” And here he does just that. Having transformed their lives and their outlook on life, he now tells them that they are to go and continue his mission (v21). Just as he has been sent by the Father into this broken and hurting world, so they are to go out into it, sent, as he was, to a life of service, sacrifice and suffering. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Jesus came into the world to make a difference, to offer people glimpses of the Kingdom of God; to spend himself entirely in the service of humanity; to suffer misunderstanding, misrepresentation, abuse and death; to sacrifice the experience of the glory of heaven and infinite power as he took on being human.

And that’s where his disciples are to follow. Jesus is not a comfortable person to follow. His call on our lives is uncompromising and his standards are set amazingly high. Stuart Murray and Tom Sine (as we’ve already heard) write about how the Church, having got itself to the centre of the Empire, the establishment, then spent centuries trying to explain away Jesus’ clear teaching – as we continue to do. But we too are sent out as Jesus was – vulnerable and often fearful, but ultimately triumphant. We too are called to a life of service, a life of suffering if necessary, a life of sacrifice. (Another book that’s challenging but helpful here is Shane Claiborne’s *The Irresistible Revolution*.) But we are not sent out unprepared, for there is one more thing Jesus does as he stands at the heart of this gathering of his followers.

5. HE GAVE THEM HIS HOLY SPIRIT

Having commissioned his disciples, Jesus equips them for the task. He breathes upon them and tells them they are to receive his Holy Spirit (v22). Now there’s a lot of stuff that’s been written about how this relates to Pentecost and I don’t propose to go into all that this morning. Whether they actually receive the Spirit here or whether it’s a precursor to Pentecost isn’t the point. The point is that these transformed believers, these committed followers of Jesus Christ are given the Holy Spirit to help them in their calling.

The word translated “*breathed*” here is used only here in the New Testament, but it’s used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament both in *Genesis 2:7* (“*God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being*”) and in *Ezekiel 37:9* (“*Then he said to me, Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'*”). On both occasions it’s to do with the power of life being imparted to human beings. Jesus breathes his life into these disciples, a life that transforms, equips, empowers. These people have already been through some pretty hefty changes over the Easter weekend, but their lives will never be the same again now that they have the Holy Spirit of Jesus within them.

Jesus calls us to follow him and, as we've said, that call is a demanding one. If we really do take Jesus seriously then we'll need a bit of outside help. And that help comes from Jesus himself. He promises us this same Holy Spirit and he will breathe his Spirit into our lives if we want him to. The trouble is, if we have relegated Jesus to the margins, if we have edged him out of our lives, out of our church life, then he isn't close enough to breathe on us.

God has done some amazing things in this church over the past ten years. As so often, he's done them gently and slowly so we don't always notice what's gone on until we pause and look back. And a lot of them, I suspect, he's done in spite of us. But I hope and pray he'll continue doing them, that the next ten years will see more people coming to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour for the first time, that more people will want to witness to that transformation by being baptised, that the followers of Jesus in this place will truly want Jesus at the heart of their lives – that we will all want him at the heart of this church – and that we will know him so close to us that he can breathe his Holy Spirit into our lives to equip us and move us forward in his purposes.

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God has blessed us as a church in all kinds of ways over the past few years as we have taken on the task of being "*A church at the heart of the city ...*" But the great danger for us is that we forget the second part of the statement – "*... with Christ at the heart of the church.*" That is, in fact, the more important part of the statement of our vision.

In this passage we read of Jesus being physically at the heart of his group of disciples. In *v19* John writes that "*Jesus came and stood among them*" or "*at the heart of them*". And what he did on that occasion can help us understand what it's like to keep Jesus at the heart of the church.

1. HE PROMISED THEM HIS PEACE

Jesus wants them to know that their relationship with him is secure. He is promising them his calm and his protection. He has overcome sin, evil and death on the cross and through the empty tomb, so they need not fear a thing. There's a strong echo here of what he said to them in *John 14:27*. If we keep him at the heart of our church, then we too can hang on to that promise of peace, that assurance of Jesus' forgiveness and protection.

2. HE SHOWED THEM HIS SCARS

Jesus reminds them not only who he is, but what he has done for them. He has died to deal with the consequences of their sin – and the sin of all humanity. Keeping Jesus at the heart of our lives and our church means that we are reminded constantly of his immense love for us.

3. HE FILLED THEM WITH JOY

Because they now knew that Jesus was back at the heart of their group they were "*overjoyed*". It was another fulfilment of Jesus' words to them in *John 16:22*. Having Jesus at the heart of our lives means that we do not live our lives as people who fear the future – short-term or eternal.

4. HE SENT THEM OUT

Jesus had prayed to his Father about the disciples in *John 17:18* and now he tells them that they are to go and continue his mission (*v21*) – a life of service, sacrifice and suffering. But we are not sent out unprepared, because ...

5. HE GAVE THEM HIS HOLY SPIRIT

Having commissioned his disciples, Jesus equips them for the task. He breathes upon them and tells them they are to receive his Holy Spirit (*v22*). He "*breathed*" the Spirit into them (look at *Genesis 2:7*, *Ezekiel 37:9*). Jesus breathes his life into these disciples, a life that transforms, equips, empowers. He promises us this same Holy Spirit and he will breathe his Spirit into our lives if we want him to.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you see our church as being "at the heart of the city"? In what ways are you involved in that? What could still be done?
2. How do you understand the peace of Jesus? What difference has it made to your life?
3. How can we ensure that we do not forget Jesus' scars?
4. Have you ever been overjoyed by Jesus? Tell the rest of the group about it.
5. Jesus sends us out to "a life of service, sacrifice and suffering". Do you ever feel that being a Christian involves sacrifice or suffering? Why/why not?
6. What does it mean to have Jesus breathe his Spirit into us? How does that happen?