

“RESOURCING THE VISION”
Isaiah 54:2; Malachi 3:6-18

Well, we've come to the end of our short series of sermons looking at our mission statement, the vision of the church here in Wade Street. Over the past few weeks we've looked at our calling to be “*A church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church.*” We've reflected on what it means to be people who are being changed by God and the way in which we “*look upwards in worship*”, wondering at God's work in creation and his love in salvation. We've thought about the progress we're making as we “*look forwards to growth and maturity*” – seeking to develop our love for God and our knowledge of him through studying The Bible, prayer and talking with one another. And we've seen how we ought to “*look outwards in care, concern and evangelism*”, taking seriously the words in James's letter that the best sort of religion is that which has a heart for the poor and the weak.

Last week we talked about what we do with this vision and came to the conclusion that it's something we need to keep working away at, resisting the temptation to succumb to the attitude of short-termism which afflicts so much of our lives and recognising that we are in this for the long haul, trusting God to make it clear to us when we should move on to something different. Although sticking faithfully to this vision is demanding and can be difficult for us, we looked at Paul's words to the Philippian Christians in which we are assured that what God has started he will see through to completion. We can't be sure how long that will take, nor whether we shall see the fruit of it in our own lifetimes, even, but we believe that this work is directed by him and he will help us as we try to follow his ways.

But that vision needs to be resourced. It's not just a good idea that we can look at, and hope that it will come about. God is behind it, God will prosper it – but we are called to help implement it. And that means we need to put something into it. Together as God's people here in this place, God's people who have been called to work together in following this vision, we need to use our resources to help it along. And by resources I mean time, energy, prayer, effort, material resources (including our money). God has blessed us in all kinds of ways and, as we have said so many times before, we find ourselves – by an accident of birth as much as anything else – living in a place and at a time where we are immensely privileged and very well provided for. This is a congregation full of people who are rich in money, education, comfort, prospects, abilities, freedom, choices – all the kinds of things that are useful in the resourcing of a vision for God's Kingdom.

Let me take you back to the passage which we felt was God's word to us as we embarked on the development of these premises and this work as part of God's vision for us. Those of you who were around at the time will remember that Tina Lopes, who was at that time serving God in Chile wrote to us and suggested we looked at *Isaiah 54* – she wasn't sure exactly which bit, or why, but felt that in there was what God was wanting to say to us. We prayed and talked and focussed in on v2. And we've hung on to that verse throughout the past few years as God's way of making clear to us his will for Wade Street Church. We've done some enlarging and a bit of stretching as we've developed our premises. We've been lengthening and strengthening as we've tried to build up disciples and get a bit more mature in our Christian lives. And right at the centre of that verse is the phrase, “*Don't hold back*”. It fits in very nicely with what we were thinking about last week – about giving it all we've got, striking the arrows five or six times rather than just three (if you weren't here last week, you'll need to look at *2 Kings 13* to appreciate that). God says to us, as we stick to the vision he's given us, “*Don't hold back!*” Go for it! I've got my plans for you, but you need to put everything you've got into it – and that means the resources you may currently be holding back.

You see, we're already noticing the fruit of all that, aren't we? It's apparent in all kinds of ways. I'd love to read out some of the thank-you letters we've had from outside organisations who use our premises, which are beginning to show what an impact this church is having on the local community. We have seen great things happening with the older people in this area through the Lunch Club and Film Afternoons. And the things that are starting to develop with the children's and youth work are showing that the decisions we took several years ago are now starting to bear fruit. There are great things happening here

– with Messy Church, with The Toddler Group, with The Mob, with the Sunday Club: all growing and drawing in people from outside the church who are hearing the gospel and seeing it in action. There are great things happening in the local schools with the Lichfield Christian School's Work Trust, with the Christian Unions that Anthony and Becki are leading in the local high schools, with the Puppet Theatre and the Schools' Weeks here at Easter and Christmas. There are great things happening in the community as we get involved in the Bower (you should have seen the queues to get into the children's activities on Monday), the Fuse Festival – with Youth For Christ wanting to base their team here next year.

These are great things and we are seeing young people's lives transformed by the Holy Spirit as he works through the teams of people led by Anne Badcock and Anthony Narain. But it doesn't just happen. It needs resourcing – with volunteers, with equipment – let's not beat about the bush: with money. It would be a terrible shame if, just as we are really starting to see things happen, the resources started to dry up. We need some people to step in and take the places of those who feel they have to stand down – not least, Mark and Rachel Joint who have done so much for The Mob over the past few years. We need the money to keep on employing our children's and youth workers, Anthony and Anne (or her replacement as she retires next spring). We need prayer – ongoing, focussed prayer – to uphold and support those who are working on the front line here. It's important that we keep on providing what is needed so that the work continues to develop.

Flick over in your Bibles to the reading we had from *Malachi 3*. This is a hard book to read, isn't it? It's not very long, so take a few minutes to read it through when you get home – if you dare! Here's God saying to people who have the resources his work needs that they should be prepared to release a bit more of it. Basically, they're holding back what they've got, not giving God the "*tithe*" that they should be giving to him. The "*tithe*" was 10% of their income, a way of giving back to God something that would enable his work to proceed. Amongst other things, it fed the priests who led the worship of the people and prayed for the nation in the Temple (that's why it says "*that there may be food in my house*"). We may not feel that we need to keep to such a prescriptive percentage today, but it's clear from what Jesus teaches and what Paul writes in the New Testament that we should plan to give a proportion of our income to the work of the Kingdom of God.

And God says to his people here – through the prophet Malachi – bring the whole lot. "*Don't hold back!*". We have cut back what we spend as a church in all kinds of ways – you wouldn't believe the deals Rob Dodd manages to get on the things we use here week by week! – but there is always the need for people to dig deep into their reserves of time, energy and money if we are to move forward. It can be done. The resources are here. It's just a question of unlocking them. Let me give you an example.

Now, this is in no way intended to suggest that we shouldn't have any fun, that we shouldn't go on holiday, that the holidays we take are unnecessary – it's just a "for instance" to help put things in perspective. I decided to do an experiment, a little survey. I asked a fairly representative group of a dozen people from this congregation how much they will spend on holidays this year. Seven of them responded and it's completely anonymous – I know who the twelve were, but I don't know which seven replied. But what those seven people (and their spouses or families) spent going on holiday this year would completely fund a full time youth or children's worker on a generous salary with all the on-costs (around £25,000). The resources are there – it's just a question of how we use them. I am making no judgements about that, simply stating the case.

And God says, "Go on – give it a go! Don't hold back. Try me. See what might happen if you really do give me your whole tithe." That's what he says through Malachi in *3:10*. "You get ready to give back to me something of what I've blessed you with and you won't believe the blessings I'll pour out on you. I will throw open the floodgates of heaven and you won't know what to do with it all." If we are prepared to give God all that we can – it may be time, it may be energy, it may be money, it may be time spent in prayer, it may be our specialist skills – then he will pour out his blessings in ways that, I suspect, few of us have ever experienced before.

Now, just a word of warning here. This is not the so-called “Prosperity Gospel”, nor “Health and Wealth” teaching. We don’t give to God just so that he will make us richer and richer. That is totally at odds with the teaching of Jesus. This is, if you like, a *response* to what God has *already* done – look at 3:6. God has blessed us already. He has shown his amazing grace and mercy to us in Jesus and has helped us to make the most of that in our lives both personally and as a church. In fact, everything we have has come from him in the first place anyway.

No, this is really an opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of God. It is putting our resources into God’s work in order that he can bless other people. It is helping to resource the vision that God has given us as a church, so that others can share in God’s love and blessings. In a sense it’s doing what Jesus talks about in The Sermon On The Mount – putting aside treasure in heaven. We may not see any advantage ourselves at the moment – even in our lifetimes. But we wouldn’t be here today if those of previous generations over the past two centuries hadn’t taken these words seriously. Are you ready to do that?

The people to whom Malachi first addressed these words mumbled about it all being futile. They didn’t think it would make any difference. It was a demand on their resources that they could do without. But we know that it’s not futile. We are starting to see the fruit of people’s work and giving. And, more importantly, we saw last week that God will not allow something he has called into being to fail. He will see it through to completion. Investing in the Kingdom of God is really the only sure bet there is. Now, I know it’s difficult. It’s difficult having to say these things from the front. It’s difficult seeing where we’re going to draw the resources up from. These are not easy times – as Prince Charles acknowledged in his speech at the end of the Jubilee Concert on Monday. But the resources are there. We simply need to see how we can unlock them if this vision that God has given us is to continue to be pursued. Think about it. Pray about it. How are you going to respond?

On Tuesday week we shall be holding our regular Church Meeting and this subject will come up. Come along and join in the discussion, and help us to see where we’re going. That’s what Church Meetings are all about anyway. And then, on the Sundays of 15th and 22nd July we shall be holding two gift days (just in case you miss one of them!) at which there will be an opportunity to offer your resources, and opportunity to test God and see if he isn’t willing to “*open the floodgates of heaven*” as you pledge your time, abilities and money for the work of the Kingdom here. That might mean offering a couple of hours a month to help The Mob or Messy Church, it might mean making a one-off gift of money or signing up to a regular gift – or even signing up to Gift Aid so that what you’re already giving goes further. But please think and pray about it.

“Don’t hold back ... Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse ... Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”

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Look at *Isaiah 54:2*. We've done some enlarging and a bit of stretching as we've developed our premises. We've been lengthening and strengthening as we've tried to build up disciples and get a bit more mature in our Christian lives. And right at the centre of that verse is the phrase, "*Don't hold back*". (Look at *2 Kings 13* which we considered last week.)

Look at *Malachi 3*. This is a hard book to read. God is saying to people who have the resources his work needs that they should be prepared to release a bit more of it. Basically, they're holding back what they've got, not giving God the "*tithe*" that they should be giving to him. The "*tithe*" was 10% of their income, a way of giving back to God something that would enable his work to proceed. Amongst other things, it fed the priests who led the worship of the people and prayed for the nation in the Temple (that's why it says "*that there may be food in my house*"). It's clear from what Jesus teaches and what Paul writes in the New Testament that we should plan to give a proportion of our income to the work of the Kingdom of God.

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This is an opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of God. It is putting our resources into God's work in order that he can bless other people. It is helping to resource the vision that God has given us as a church, so that others can share in God's love and blessings. In a sense it's doing what Jesus talks about in The Sermon On The Mount – putting aside treasure in heaven.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what ways can you see that the vision for Wade Street Church is being fulfilled? What resources have been needed for that so far?
2. In the Old Testament God's people were told to give a "tithe", 10% of their income, to his work. Should we still keep to that? Why/why not?
3. Should we expect a return on what we give to God? Why/why not? If so, what kind of return?
4. Do you think it matters how we use our discretionary income?

5. What can we offer to God other than money? How might that be used at Wade Street Church?