

“KEEPING FOCUSED”
2 Kings 13:10-25; Philippians 1:3-11

Well, we're back together after the summer holidays: some people have been away, most of the activities of the church have been suspended, there's been a bit of a break in our programme. But now we're back. Our youth and children's work team has been recommissioned and we, as a congregation, have made some commitments, too. House groups are getting going again. Events are planned. Church life is cranking up again.

So maybe it's a good time to remind ourselves what this is all about – after all, we all find it easy to get so caught up in what's going on that we overlook why we're doing it. We talked a bit about that last week as we considered Jesus' attack on the Pharisees and Teachers of the law in *Matthew 23*. And it's a while since we reflected on our own mission statement, which sets out our focus, our vision for our work, worship and witness together. Since the last time we considered it, there are several of you who have joined this congregation and you might not have picked up on that – although it's on the back of the church magazine, on the notice sheet and displayed around the building.

So, let's first remind ourselves of the words of our church mission statement – that short paragraph that we feel sums up what we are trying to do here as God's people. We are “*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.*” And as people who make up that church, people whose lives are being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are “*looking upwards in worship*”, wondering at God's work in creation and his love in salvation. We are “*looking forwards to growth and maturity*”, developing and growing in our knowledge and love of God and one another. And we are “*looking outwards in care, concern and evangelism*”, taking seriously our charge from God to look after those around us who are having a hard time of it as we offer glimpses of God's Kingdom in our daily lives. And as we look at those phrases, we can perhaps see the way in which, as a church, we are starting to fulfil that vision that God has given us – there are all kinds of encouragements that we can see in the work that is going on here.

So, it seems as if we have managed to get on top of these things and now it is time to look for a new vision, a new set of things to aim for. At least, that is what some people might say. But it's not like that, is it? We haven't yet fulfilled this vision. It is not something we now move on from – because there is still an awful lot to do. There are still people to care for, there is still a need for us to keep on growing into God and his love, there is a constant imperative to worship. Those things are all very much at the heart of what any church should be doing and we can't say that we are moving on beyond them, because we haven't yet successfully attained them.

Part of our problem, I always think, is the problem which afflicts our society as a whole – short-termism. Whether it's the need to make a quick profit rather than train a decent workforce or the need to get into the Champions League within a few months of appointing the new manager or the desire for revival after a couple of quick prayer meetings, we all want stuff to happen immediately – or even quicker, if possible. And if it doesn't, then we feel we've somehow failed. We need to take the long view, to realise that it has taken several years since we first appointed Anne Badcock as our children's worker for the fruit of that to be seen in the kids going into Ignite, to recognise that people who come along to Monday Lunch or Messy Church or the Toddler Groups need to make quite a journey before they express a vibrant faith, to accept that we aren't going to be accorded the respect of the community until we have proved ourselves in the way we use our premises. Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, nor were the great revivals of the past, nor is the Kingdom of God in the present. We are in this for the long haul, folks, and that means we might not even see the results of our labours in our own life times.

It also means that we cannot sit back and take our ease with a sense of complacency, a feeling that we have done all we need to because we now have two good congregations on a Sunday morning or larger groups in the Sunday Club or a foot in the door of various local organisations. God is still calling us forward with the same mandate, the same mission statement to fulfil. Over the past few years we have sat around in various groups, not least the leadership and elders of this church, and asked God what he wants us to do next, where he wants us to go. We'll be doing that again at our Awayday at St Mary's Abbey next month – and we may well find that God wants to move us in a different direction: you never know. But the answer every time so far has been that we should be faithful to the task God has given us and keep working to the vision that is before us – at least until God makes it very clear that there is something different for us to do. It's still exciting, doing these things that God has set before us. There's still plenty of scope to use our gifts and resources for his glory and for the transformation of our own lives and the life of the community in which he has called us to worship, work and witness. And in our two readings this morning there are two exhortations, two encouragements to us from great men of God – one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

1. **ELISHA** (*2 Kings 13:18ff*)

This odd little story comes from the very end of Elisha's life. The great prophet is ill and about to die, but the King of Israel, Jehoash, goes to see him. The story follows a fairly formulaic and brief summary of Jehoash's life. He was an evil king in God's sight, he reigned for 16 years and his reign was notable for a war with Amaziah, king of Judah. And from that summary description of his life, one incident is recorded: his meeting with Elisha.

Elisha expresses what he has to say in two prophetic actions. Firstly, he takes the king's hands as he fires an arrow out through the window. And secondly, as he tells the king to strike the ground with the arrows he has in his quiver. It's that second action I want us to reflect on briefly this morning. Jehoash takes the arrows and strikes the ground with them three times. Some translations have it that he shot them into the ground, but that's not the point. The point is that he does it only three times, rather than the five or six times that he might have done. Maybe he had five or six arrows in his quiver and shot only three of them. However it actually happened, the man of God scolds the king for doing it only three times.

Elisha is of the opinion that Jehoash didn't use all his resources effectively, that he wasn't prepared to give it all he'd got. Basically, he tells the king that he has held back and been too reticent, so now he will not be able to achieve his greater aim of defeating his enemies. Jehoash has limited his vision by his reluctance really to go for it. He's content with less than the best.

Is that what God might be saying to us? IUs there a sense maybe that we are prepared to settle for less than the best. Oh yes, we've seen great things happen here over the past few years and so we might start to think we've achieved all that God wants us to. But, however good is the situation we have now, there is far more to come. We must not, in the catchy phrase of the management guru, allow the good to take the place of the best. There is still much more to do. We cannot and must not say that we've not done too badly so far so surely that's enough. We cannot slacken off and take our ease after three strikes, when God wants us to go further. We cannot suddenly moderate our enthusiasm and sit back on our laurels.

The question is, are we really prepared to give it all we've got, to use our resources – material resources, time, energy, enthusiasm, gifts, abilities – to the full. If we are to keep going and see this vision being fulfilled, then we need to show some zeal and some application. We must not be satisfied with half measures. I get the sense – and I know from conversations with some of you – that there are even greater things waiting for us if we are prepared to strike the arrows five or six times, if we are ready to make the most of what we've got and really go for it. It may take us off in different directions, into areas as yet untried – but that's part of the excitement of working for the Kingdom of God! Are you up for that? Are you prepared to pray hard about that this autumn

2. PAUL (*Philippians 1:3-11*)

Let's hop over to the New Testament now and look at what another man of God, the Apostle Paul, has to say about this. He's writing this letter to the Christians who are meeting in Philippi. It's a letter which

overflows with joy and encouragement, which oozes God's goodness and sings with praise for the privilege of being part of God's plan. Paul expresses his gratitude to the Philippian Christians several times in these four chapters, and he starts off as he means to go on with these verses which we have just heard. (You may recall that we looked at these verses a few weeks ago when Tim & Helen Jakeman were with us – but I assure you this isn't the same sermon!)

Paul is especially grateful, it seems, for the way in which they are working together with him for the good of the gospel. He writes of their "*partnership in the gospel*", which Eugene Peterson translates as "*together believing and proclaiming God's message*". The word behind "*partnership*" is "*koinonia*", a Greek word which means "*the things they have in common*". They are all together in this. Paul has done some amazing work – you can read about that in *Acts* and in his other letters – but so have the Philippians. Together they have been "striking the arrows" five or six times. But there is still more to do. Paul wants to continue on this work: he is not prepared to sit back. Even as he was being held under house arrest in Rome, he is still preaching the gospel, still witnessing to those around him (*1:12-14*).

What drives him to do that, though? How can he keep going under such trying conditions? Why doesn't he just give up? Surely he has struck the arrows enough times? The key is that this isn't actually Paul's work at all. Nor is it the Philippians' work. This is God's work. As one writer comments on these verses, "*Man may give up a work he undertakes, but not God*" (F Foulkes in *New Bible Commentary Revised*). Fortunately, this doesn't depend only on Paul, only on the Philippians, only on us. God will keep on working until his plans are achieved. As Magnus Magnusson so famously used to say: "*I've started, so I'll finish.*" That's what *v6* is all about.

Of course, as we have to remind ourselves so often, the Holy Spirit is active in all this. It is his power that is available to us, that strengthens us and enthuses us, especially when we feel we'd rather give up. We can rely on God's help in keeping on following the vision he has given us. If we truly believe it is his will for us – and I certainly do – then we need to keep moving forward in the power of the Holy Spirit, continuing
to "*look upwards in worship, forwards to growth and maturity and outwards in care, concern and evangelism.*"

We may, of course, ask why we need to do anything if God's going to sort it all out anyway. If he's going to bring it to completion, why do we need to bother? Well, it's about the amazing privilege of all this. We have the privilege of being included in this as God brings the vision to fruition. We are immensely privileged to be working with God in this. It's a bit like being an intern with the greatest designer in the world, or the greatest composer, or the greatest politician, or the greatest football coach.

We are in on the job with God! Isn't that amazing? There's more to do – but much, much more to look forward to.

You see, God is doing a great work here. He's been doing it in this congregation for over two hundred years – since the time of good old William Salt. He's been doing it in the city for over thirteen hundred years – since the time of St Chad. He's been doing it amongst us – this particular group of people – for three decades. We're privileged to be part of that, but I believe there are even more significant things ahead if we're prepared to go for it, to strike the arrows five or six times, knowing that God will prosper that work and eventually bring it to fruition. We should really give it all we've got, and expect God to as well. We need confidence in him and a sense of real joy that he has chosen us to be part of that.

The vision is still very much alive, folks. There's still plenty for us to do. It would be an awful shame if we gave up on it now, just as we are starting to see some real fruit being borne. And there are many more possible ways in which we can serve this community. If we pull back from giving it all we've got, then we're betraying those who have gone before and those who will come after us. In the meantime, let's thank God that we are privileged to be involved with him in the building of his Kingdom, let's keep praying that we don't lose sight of what we've been called to do, and why – and let's keep asking for more of his Holy Spirit to stick with it and look out for even greater things happening.

"MOVING ON WITH THE VISION"
2 Kings 13:10-25; Philippians 1:3-11

There are all kinds of encouragements that we can see in the work that is going on in our church. But we haven't yet fully fulfilled the vision God has given us. It is not something we now move on from – because there is still an awful lot to do. There are still people to care for, there is still a need for us to keep on growing into God and his love, there is a constant imperative to worship. We need to beware the problem of short-termism and take the long view, to realise that we are in this for the long haul, and we might not even see the results of our labours in our own life times.

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Is that what God might be saying to us? That we are prepared to settle for less than the best. However good is the situation we have now, there is far more to come. We must not allow the good to take the place of the best. There is still much more to do. We cannot suddenly moderate our enthusiasm and sit back on our laurels. Are we really prepared to give it all we've got, to use our resources – material resources, time, energy, enthusiasm, gifts, abilities – to the full.

2. PAUL (Philippians 1:3-11)

Paul is especially grateful for the way in which the Philippians are working together with him for the good of the gospel. Paul wants to continue on this work: he is not prepared to sit back. Even as he was being held under house arrest in Rome, he is still preaching the gospel, still witnessing to those around him (1:12-14). The key is that this isn't actually Paul's work at all. Nor is it the Philippians' work. This is God's work. *"Man may give up a work he undertakes, but not God"* (F Foulkes in *New Bible Commentary Revised*). God will keep on working until his plans are achieved.

But if God's going to bring it to completion, why do we need to bother? Firstly, God has deigned to work through us to effect this vision. We have the privilege of being used by him as he brings the vision to fruition. And that's really the second part, too – we are immensely privileged to be working with God in this. There's more to do – but much, much more to look forward to.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you think we are doing in terms of working towards the vision God has given us?
2. How will we know when we should stop working towards it?
3. What are the dangers of short-termism? Are there any benefits? Why is it so attractive to us?
4. Look at the story from *2 Kings 13*. Is it right to draw from it the lessons we drawn from it? How might our reticence manifest itself?
5. Do Paul's words encourage you? Why/why not?
6. What do you think we might still have to look forward to as a church? Be bold in your imagination!