

# The extraordinary in the ordinary

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## An Extraordinary Vision

Vision is a powerful thing isn't it? Some people have a personal vision and it leads them to achieve great things. History is littered with examples of people who followed extraordinary visions and who achieved extraordinary things. Perhaps a vision is about seeing a better future and as we come to a new year we are often encouraged to look forward and see a better future aren't we? Maybe you're in the habit of making a new year's resolution, and maybe in a small or significant way, that's partly about a better future. It could be about starting something you haven't been doing that will make your life better: going to the gym or organizing your money. Or it could be about trying to stop doing something that isn't helpful, and by stopping, your life will be better: going to bed late; spending too much on things you don't need; reading books that are unhelpful.... A vision of a desired future can be a very powerful thing. We may, or may not be, very good at keeping New Year's resolutions – if we make them at all - but some visions capture us and move us to do things we might not have thought possible.

For me – and I speak personally – vision in this church has been very powerful. I remember when we began the process of vision casting. I sat listening to Bryn Hughes thinking – I don't get this – he is talking a language I don't understand and I can't see how this has anything to do with me. However, as we continued to talk about, and to dream vision, I was gripped. And over the period of time we all spent thinking about and talking about vision, the more excited about it I became. Together, we discerned what we thought God had in store for this church: "We will be seeing significant changes in the lives of the people of Crawley as they are drawn to the love of Christ through a growing community of Christians where every person is fulfilled in their gifts." This became a very powerful vision, we saw many significant changes in people's lives, we witnessed some of that in regular baptisms, and we saw a community of believers growing in all sorts of different ways.

One of the most powerful for me was that of small groups. We spent time wrestling with how we could help one another better. Steve Pidgeon and others took up the challenge and we moved from Home Groups to Small Groups. We went from some people regularly committing to a Home Group to most people regularly committing to a Small Group. We had new groups springing up that were helpful, accessible and relevant. We wondered where new leaders would come from – but they came – and they still come. We had groups for men and groups for women. We had Alpha groups becoming Small Groups.

We said we wanted to be a community that was fulfilled in its gifts. We started the Network course, and out of the freedom that brought we had new ministries beginning – Families First with its parenting and couples courses; sports and leisure – football, stepping out ... to name just a few.

The redevelopment of the building was always going to serve the vision and that's exactly what it's done. This building serves not only this church, but also increasingly the community. This building is becoming busier and busier and one of our biggest challenges is how to manage that and how to facilitate it.

Because we are human and vision can wane – we went through the process again and wrote a new Vision Statement: “By 2010 CBC will be a vibrant family of Christians where every person is: stepping out in faith; committed to growing partnerships across churches; reaching communities with God's love.” We've seen this coming to life too. A vibrant family... Meal4Nothing and XRhythms. The pictures of the hands that remind us we are a family of all colours, shape and sizes, ages and interests. I've had other churches ask me about them - how we did it, what it means. I have even had one church that wanted me to send them pictures so that they could copy them! We've visited the Cameroon for the first time because we want to grow a partnership with our brothers and sisters there to help translate the Bible into Aghemso people can hear the Gospel in their own tongue. There have been worship conferences, held here which have drawn together people from many churches, there's now a group of worship leaders in Crawley who meet together.

Are we reaching communities with God's love? We have friends we invited to the Carol Service. He would say – he doesn't do church and he doesn't really do Carol Services. Afterwards he said he was 'converted' – he really enjoyed it – especially the choir. His son then asked: “Does that mean we can go to church every week?” Some of their friends, who we've met a couple of times, came on Christmas day. They were so impressed by the friendliness and what happened – they want to come again, and their children are apparently really excited about the idea of coming! I've heard other similar stories!

Vision has served this church really well and this is a good church. It's growing; it's bucking the national trend in church attendance; ministries are growing; membership is growing; CYM is growing. We've raised £ 2 million in gifts and pledges for this building and our vision for 2008 would be to raise the rest of the money and to be done with the redevelopment costs. I am absolutely convinced we can do it! I am absolutely convinced that God's best for us in 2008 would be to 'finish the task'. Vision has been very powerful in this church in recent years – and it will continue to be. And I hope that all I've said excites you about what we've seen and what we are going to see. But friends, here's a vision that is much more important, because it is a vision from which all our vision must come.

Ephesians 1 v 1-14

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together

under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.”

Friends, as followers of Christ, you are so blessed. God blesses us because he must bless – it is who he is – he cannot be otherwise. He longs to pour out his blessing upon you, day after day after day. He wants to do that now, right now. He wants to do it in 2008, daily, always. That is who he is – the one in whom you trust. This is a vision of blessing – of extraordinary blessing in the lives of ordinary people. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Every blessing we have comes from God – that's what it means, and it says he has “blessed us in the heavenly realms” with every spiritual blessing. We might want to understand this as theological blessings – the blessings associated with church or our spiritual life. But “heavenly realms” mean the spiritual reality that surrounds us. Another way to understand it would be that it means the presence of God. We tend to want to separate the material from the spiritual – but we don't need to do that. Here's what one commentator says:

“Some people might think that “every spiritual blessing” refers only to theological or churchly things, but that is because we have made a completely unbiblical distinction between body and spirit, with the result that we assume that spiritual blessings are not materials. However, instead of a line down the middle to divide intangible or heavenly/ethereal things from the tangible and earthly, imagine a great big circle of spiritual blessing, inside of which is the smaller component of bodily gifts. Spiritual blessing is not outside of and peripheral to bodily blessing; it encompasses all kinds of blessings, including the material, for surely God's Spirit is resident in everything.”<sup>1</sup>

So spiritual blessing encompasses material blessings and our lives can take on a different focus when we can place the trials and challenges of our lives into the larger category of spiritual blessing. It means that the whole of life, all of it, the good bits, the trash and tough bits can be hallowed if you place them within the encompassing sphere of every divine blessing because you will be able to say; even in this situation, God can bring blessing. Friends, when we live in the spiritual reality of the kingdom of God – which is everywhere his presence is –we can be blessed in all things and in all situations. That is an extraordinary vision of reality – and one that is open to us – and as close as the air we breathe. What a difference it would make to 2008 if we grasped this vision of reality. This is true because he chose us (v4). He chose us before the creation of the world. Friends you have always been on his mind – such is his love for you. And it has always been on God's heart to have a people holy and blameless – set apart. He saw through all that would go wrong – the sin that would separate us from him and he chose us “ in Christ” – that wonderful plan of salvation that rescues us from the kingdom of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. The spiritual reality where all these blessings become ours at the moment we commit to Christ! He did this in love – he loves you because he loves you because he loves you... He freely gave us Christ and all the blessing that brings. He

adopted us as his children – meaning we can inherit all the blessings he wants to give us. We have redemption (v7) and forgiveness through Christ.

Deuteronomy 7 v 6 – 8 reminds us of what God said to His people Israel way back in the Old Testament:

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh King of Egypt.”

And he lavished this on us. Do you catch the excitement of this vision? He has given us far, far more than we need or deserve – it is simply extraordinary! From v 9, Paul reminds us again that God loved us so much that he sent Christ to fulfil his plans and purposes. “For God so loved the world” (John 3 v 16). And this is for all people. Don’t get lost in the predestination argument friends. God wishes that none should perish, and all that Paul writes here becomes wonderfully true for everyone who comes to faith in Christ. At the moment of coming to faith all of this blessing becomes gloriously and fantastically and unbelievably true. It is for everyone! Friends if we could grasp this extraordinary vision of the spiritual reality in which we live then we would be better able to walk towards another vision:

- that we might become more the vibrant family we already are in Christ – his children blessed with every blessing of God;
- that we would take God at his word, and filled with the spirit, walk in faith and not by sight;
- that we would take church – his body – seriously and have a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude to fulfilling our part in it and serving wholeheartedly;
- that we would share God’s love for all people with our family, friends and work colleagues with a passion that reflects all that God has lavished on us.

An extraordinary vision for ordinary people! But then, we have an extraordinary God!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2008

