

ORDINARY HEROES

Heroic Giving

Today's talk is actually two talks.

Talk number 1:

Our Vision statement says: Crawley Baptist Church – Bursting with Life!

What a statement that is: Bursting with life! And what is wonderfully true is there is life in this church community. It might be true that we are not bursting with life in everything. It might be true that because we are flawed human beings we are not always bursting with life. It might be true that we have not yet reached our full redemptive potential. But it is wonderfully true that Crawley Baptist Church is bursting with life!

Occasionally I have articulated what I hold in my heart about the kind of church that I would like to be part of. It goes like this:

I would like to be part of a church where leaders lead diligently.

I would like to be part of a church where ministries are led by people of passion.

I would like to be part of a church where life groups are vibrant, challenging and real.

I would like to be part of a church where worship is vibrant and real and engaging.

I would like to be part of a church which invests in its young people and children.

I would like to be part of a church which cares and supports and values those in their senior years.

I would like to be part of a church that fully engages in mission.

I would like to be part of a church that helps and supports families.

I would like to be part of a church where people are fulfilled in their gifts.

I would like to be part of a church that serves the community.

I would like to be part of a church where the lost are a burden on people's hearts.

I would like to be part of a church where people are fully devoted to following Christ.

I would like to be part of a church that lives for the kingdom of the heavens.

I would like to be part of a church that gives generously.

I would like to be part of a church like that because a church like that would bring honour to God's name.

Sometimes I take the time to reflect on Crawley Baptist Church and find myself wondering what kind of church it is. And here is what I find myself thinking:

I see a church that is lead by leaders who lead diligently.

I see a church bursting with ministries of all kinds led by people who live out what they hold in their hearts - the passion within. I see these ministries because people are prepared to arrive early and stay late and give their time to something bigger than themselves.

I see a church thriving with Life Groups, led by leaders who are committed to their growth and the growth of others. I am privileged to be part of Life Groups with people who will listen to me, challenge me, encourage me and pray for me! Thank You!

I see a church blessed with worship leaders who love God with all their hearts and who love to worship. I see a church with talented musicians who have no desire to make a name for themselves but who want to bring others into worship with God.

I see a church that holds its young people and children in the highest regard. I see a church whose heart is to see those young people and children flourish in both faith and life.

I see a church which values those in their senior years, recognising that we stand on their shoulders, and that can do what it does today because they have gone before us.

I see a church that fully engages in mission because it is a church that has a glimpse of the heart of God for all people. I see a church that seeks to grow strong families and seeks to hold its families in all the pain, tension, misunderstanding and challenges that face all families.

I see a church where people are willing and eager to serve in their gifts to bless the whole community of faith. I see a church that is desperate to serve the community and is always working to do it better and better – because it welcomes those from outside the church.

I see a church with a heart for the lost – always holding them before God’s great and magnificent love. I see a church of fully devoted followers of Christ living in the best way they know how as they walk day by day in their faith.

I see a church that longs that the kingdom of the heavens would be seen here and now.

And I see a church that gives generously in so, so many ways.

I see a church that gives:

- People give their time: they turn up early, they leave late, they come at odd times and challenging times, when it is convenient and when it is not.
- People give by using their gifts, they serve in ministries, they turn up and make things happen, they respond to requests for help.
- People serve one another, they give of themselves to help, support, guide, care for and walk with others – they serve them freely and willingly.
- People give their wisdom, they wrestle with the challenges of being church
- People give their money!

Friends, the truth is, there would be no CBC if this church did not give financially. As I look at this church, I see a church that gives and has given generously. I see a church that has a history of generous giving. I see a church that gave so very generously during the redevelopment project:

- £ 2 million
- Paid off five years early
- Supporting our brothers and sisters in Hunedoara to build their church
- Supporting the outreach of this church – money we are still, right now, spending.

I see a church that from time to time receives extraordinarily generous financial gifts that come out of hearts turned towards God, and that happened only last week! I see a church that gives generously to support a staff team that enables people like me to use my gifts and follow God’s calling on my life. I see a church that, in so many ways, gives generously, and I thank God for Crawley Baptist Church.

I thank God for the way people live out their lives of faith in this community, and I thank God for making it all possible and for the privilege of being a part of the kingdom of the heavens, here, with you! The most appropriate response to this is to bring ourselves before God in worship, so that's what we are going to do together now.

Talk number 2:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4 v 32-37)

I wonder how you would answer this question: "What does the church of today most need if it is to make a difference in the world?"

One answer might be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Another answer might be revival. Perhaps another might be a powerful demonstration of miracles. Scholars have studied how the early church ever survived.

Here was a community that was small and persecuted. Not long after it began, a Roman Emperor named Nero unleashed dreadful persecution on the fledgling Christian community. How on earth did Christianity and the community of believers survive? Biblical and historical scholars have come to this extraordinary conclusion: generosity!

One writer says it this way:

First-century Christians weren't organised, had no buildings and weren't recognized by the government. In everyday society, they were basically considered a cult. For nearly three centuries, they remained utterly powerless – ostracized socially, persecuted politically and tortured physically. And yet, somehow, their movement continued to grow.

How do you explain that?

Over the years, a number of historians have explored this phenomenon in detail. People such as Rodney Stark, Paul Johnson, and Alvin Schmidt have dedicated much of their careers to understanding how Christianity could not only survive but actually thrive. Their conclusion is nothing short of remarkable.

While Christianity had none of the conventional strengths required to start a movement, its appeal and influence can be traced to an unexpected source: generosity.

The hallmark of Christians in the first century was not their wealth. They had none. It was not their theology either. Their beliefs were so odd, religious people couldn't understand them. What gave them leverage was their inexplicable compassion and generosity. They had little, but they gave. They received little compassion, but they were willing to extend what they had to other people. They were impossible to ignore.¹

This is stunning! The early Christians gave! They gave their service, their time, their money, their goods, their safety, their comfort, their reputations.

How are you doing? How are we doing?

Barnabas is used by Luke as an example of someone who gave generously because he followed Jesus. Although we don't know how much Barnabas actually gave, what we do know is that he gave sacrificially and generously, and he gave in response to a need.

So, here is our immediate challenge. If you were able to be at Body Talk you will have heard the draft budget presented. Here's the truth: we need generous givers if we are to meet that budget! Right now, we are in deficit for this year's budget – that is, if we spend what we said we'd spend, we are not currently giving enough to meet it. And the challenge is that the budget for 2020 demands more from us financially.

This truth does not change any of the truths I spoke about in talk 1, but it does ask us to consider what it is to be a generous giver. Barnabas, it seems, responded to a need and gave sacrificially and generously, and Barnabas is given as an example of how it is in the kingdom of the heavens. As the minister of this church, which is my wonderful privilege, I ask that you consider

¹ Stanley, A., quoted in Lucas, J., *"There are no Ordinary People,"* CWR, Farnham, 2015 pages 53-54

your response to our need. We have been extraordinarily generous in the past – can we now be extraordinarily generous in the present?

Here's something I read, that as a preacher who absolutely loves to preach, I am extremely challenged by.

In a heartless world, the generosity and service of the first Christian generations was such a stunning contrast that people everywhere sat up and took notice. It is fair to speculate that Christian generosity and service did more to win people to the gospel of Christ than all the preaching that was done.²

Generosity has an extraordinarily powerful effect upon a watching world. As a church we have been able to be generous to others because of the generosity of your giving. So, we have charities and groups using the building who we don't charge because they can't afford it, but we say; "We'll pay!" Does that remind you of anything? There's a cost that can't be paid, but someone says "I'll pay."

It is, in fact, the greatest act of generosity in human history. There is a debt that can never be paid by you and me – but God says: "I'll pay!" The truth about God is that he is the most generous giver – the one who so desperately wants to give to everyone. He so desperately wants to give his great and magnificent love to all people. And here's the thing, when we give generously we reflect the character of God himself, and when we give generously we show a watching world what God is really like – the ultimate giver.

The giver of love, joy, peace, grace, mercy and forgiveness. When we give generously and heroically, we make God the hero of our story.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 29th September 2019, by Rev. Ian Phillips.

² MacDonald, G., quoted in Lucas, J., *"There are no Ordinary People,"* CWR, Farnham, 2015 page 56