

RECLAIMING THE COMMUNITY OF THE CHURCH

Ernie Whalley – Baptist Assembly 3 May 2013

I was at an induction service not long ago for a new minister, just out of college. Before the induction promises were made, Nikki shared her vision of: ‘an infectiously attractive church...’ Wow! What a vision.

At the Baptist Union Council meetings a couple of months ago, we were asked: ‘What is our vision of what we want our Baptist Union to be like?’ One response was; ‘attractive’.... a sense of ‘I want to be part of this!’

We have just listened to Philippians 1: 1-11 being read. Verse 11 in *The Message* translation includes the phrase: “... making Jesus Christ attractive to all.’

Alas, this attraction is seen by a diminishing number of people in the UK. If the data from the recent Census is to be believed, less than 60% of us now call ourselves our Christians – down 10% in 10 years. About a quarter now respond that they have ‘no faith’.

We hardly needed a national Census to tell us this. We know it from our own experience, with workmates, friends and within our families.

One observer has written about the ‘deforestation of Christian memory’. Increasing numbers of people do not know the Biblical narrative, the Gospel story. This is borne out by a true story I heard recently of a woman going into a jewellery store to buy a pendant, a silver cross necklace. She was asked by the shop assistant – a young British-born woman: ‘Do you want a plain one or one with a little man on it?’ ... Friends, we are called to guard the Gospel and make it known.

There is no time here for deep analysis of the reasons for such growing ignorance. We are in a post-Christendom era. Many Baptists and others, some influenced by Anabaptism, have been making a very important contribution to our understanding of the present age. We need our scholars, theologians and prophetic interpreters of the signs and are grateful to them for their work.

We acknowledge that church is on the edge of life for so many people. We do face tough questions:

- If current trends continue, where will your church be in 10 years’ time?
- In some of our churches, as well as those coming in through the front door, a trickle of people quietly leave through the back door:

- Many have not felt genuinely welcomed when they have crossed the threshold into our worship services – even though we proclaim a Gospel of ‘welcome to all’
- Some have felt and still feel the pain of deep hurt – exclusion on grounds of gender, race, disability, sexuality, class
- Others have faced tough personal experiences – suffering, loss and have not felt supported or only been offered unhelpful pious platitudes
- Indeed, we can often be uneasy at allowing people to ask questions, express doubts and encouraging exploration of truth
- Some have seen conflict, unhealthy tensions and power struggles between groups. I heard of a church in the United States called ‘Harmony Baptist Church’; they had a split and the breakaway church moved up the road and called themselves ... ‘Greater Harmony Baptist Church’!

Yet – with all this - I profoundly believe there is HOPE. My main focus tonight is on the church but the Kingdom of God is in the world, too! I’ve just returned from a visit to Kosovo where an agreement has been reached between Serbia and Kosovo – or a more local story, in the Bowland St synagogue in Bradford, the elderly congregation could not afford the necessary repairs to their building and it is the local Muslims who have offered to help pay the bills.

We thank God for ALL those who are regularly and faithfully part of our churches, large and small. There are many very encouraging and surprising signs of the Kingdom among us - in and beyond the church! I rejoice in what I’ve seen and experienced already and look forward to seeing much more as I travel round in the coming year.

Yes – we recognise rapid change in the world and within our Baptist churches. There has been much hard and deep reflection over the past couple of years within our Baptist Union. We are genuinely grateful for all those who serve the wider Baptist family and remember especially those whose period of employment now comes to an end.

But ALL the changes will count for little unless we really DO make Christ-centred mission our priority. I quote from a report last year from our Futures’ Group on our values:

‘We will strive to become a Union that places Jesus Christ at its centre and its head; we will work to encourage and enable local churches to recognise his supremacy and seek to serve him and fulfil his mission.’

Can we say ‘Amen’ to that? It’s hard to disagree – but how do we make this a reality? Moving from insight to action is always the greatest challenge.

Since I was elected to serve you in this role, I have been drawn - I believe by a divine hand - to Paul's letter to the Philippians. It has grown in my mind and heart. And, yes – Philippians ch 4: 13 was the text given to me on the occasion of my baptism, as a young teenager, at the Elim Pentecostal Church in Macclesfield:

'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'

On this 200th anniversary of the first assembly of Baptists after the formation of the present Union in 1812, I want to invite our Baptist community to focus on this letter to the Philippians as a window into the Gospel – on the attractiveness of Christ; his kingdom call to follow as disciples.

As you know, the main addresses and Bible Studies are flowing from this letter – as are many of the seminars. Six Bible Studies have been prepared which I hope local churches will take up and then join in a 'conversation' – sharing the fruit of reflections, insights and prayer with the rest of us on www.likestars.org.uk

Philippi where Paul planted his first church in Europe was strategically placed on the major trade route from Asia to Europe. The church included a mixture of races and backgrounds – reflecting the community. So – it was a very challenging situation but one rich with opportunities. Nevertheless, it was a fragile church community – very much on the margins. Paul is writing from prison, yet the letter exudes JOY! He thanks the Philippians for their love and support, urges them to put Jesus Christ at the centre and live as humble servants. He exhorts them to grow in Christlikeness in their relationships and build up unity/ true harmony.

HOW THEN CAN WE RECLAIM GOD'S VISION OF CHURCH COMMUNITY AS A KINGDOM PEOPLE? Paul uses this graphic phrase, urging his readers to 'shine like stars in the universe'. Gazing at stars on a dark night still fills humanity with awe ... as in the Psalm we heard read this evening. There are echoes of Daniel 12:

'Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever'

(More on this in the Bible Study tomorrow)

Paul wants his readers to knock holes in the darkness – to allow the light of Jesus Christ to shine through – so that disciples become beacons of hope.

How can we become an infectiously attractive people, making Jesus Christ attractive to all?

I want to pick out three strands from Philippians 1, which I believe will help us all make Jesus Christ more attractive. These three strands are prophetic for us as Christians today and we need to reclaim them.

1. ATTRACTIVE THROUGH LOVE – V 9 *‘And this is my prayer – that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight’*



‘Not ‘love’ again?!’ YES – and I make no apology! The word is over-familiar and yet is foundational. Love and mercy are probably named in every act of Christian worship and rightly so. But we need to reclaim it. Self-giving love is at the heart of it all.

It starts with God. God is Love. There are many attributes to God but core to our understanding of the nature of God is LOVE. Our hymns, songs, poems strive to put this into words: ‘Amazing’ ... ‘Generous’ ... ‘Awesome’ ... ‘Indescribable’... we run out of adjectives. If love is not central to our faith, we soon lose the plot. But God says – and keeps saying! - to us and to all humanity - ‘You are my beloved ones, I accept you as you are ... (though I love you too much for you to stay as you are!) ... I understand you when you feel no one understands ... I forgive you and release you for a fresh chapter...’ This indeed is a love so profound – it STILL casts out all fear.

Recently, I met Jamail - an asylum seeker from Iran who has become a Christian. He is full of enthusiasm and his story warms the hearts of all who know him. He knows he is loved. That is joy! I call us all back to our first love - no matter how long we’ve been on the Christian road.

This Gospel - the heart of which is love - has to be proclaimed in new contexts and cultures and here I want to thank Chris Duffett for his refreshing evangelistic ministry – his challenge and encouragement to us over the last year. We need greater confidence, taking risks in reaching out with the story which transforms life and living.

In John’s Gospel, the Greeks are seeking Jesus. “We would like to see Jesus”, they say to Philip. Jesus says: *‘I, when I am lifted up will draw ... will ATTRACT ... all people to myself.’* As we lift up Jesus, the man on the cross – and not just on a silver pendant – we see love overflowing towards all humanity, especially those on the margins. He died for us, for our

sins. The weight of the world's evil converges on Jesus Christ. And he rose again! New life and hope are reborn for all who believe.

Last year, I was preaching in a small village chapel in Yorkshire. Two texts were painted either side of the organ pipes at the front of the church: 'Seek the Lord' and 'God is Love'. So many are seeking, thirsting for meaning ... And we profoundly believe that God is love and can give meaning. And our task is to be like those organ pipes – the channels between.

Of course, God can speak directly into people's lives, through the Spirit. But so often, he calls US to be channels, to live out this yeasty freedom. We are called to cultivate that love. Yes – it is a 'work to be completed', as Paul writes. We are called to live in Christlike ways and not be squeezed into the shape of the present age.

"Overflowing love more and more with knowledge and full insight". Paul urges his readers to mirror God's love – to filter the light and love of God, to shine through us. Thank God for the work that's taking place among children and young people. I recall a recent visit to Chelwood Baptist Church near Stockport and learning of their work 'Shine like stars' in schools and with children and young people. Similar work goes on with the Zephaniah Trust in Yorkshire. Thank God, too, for the drop-in centres and the befriending that goes on in so many of our churches:



- Bible studies with motor bike gangs in pubs
- Supporting initiatives to wipe out the scandal of hunger – like the IF campaign
- Chaplaincies of many kinds
- Nurturing peace – as I've just seen some wonderful education work amongst children and families and met an amazing team in a project in Kosovo – which is a partnership between BMS and the European Baptist Federation
- In our churches and communities as we learn to love those with whom we disagree ...



May the Spirit help us to listen carefully so we can discern the mind of Christ for us and our churches in these days. We know Jesus calls us to love one another, and when it's really hard the ever greater challenge is to love our enemies, to try to keep in relationship with others.

Attractive through loving.....

2. Let's look at the second: ATTRACTIVE THROUGH LONGING (v 8)



'For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ'

Here we see the heart of Paul for the people of Philippi – jailor and family, rich and poor, women and men ... we see a deep pastoral heart. LONGING ... with the compassion of Christ. This means desiring the best for others – the 'pastorhood' of all believers. Praying for one another – and I know many of our churches have prayer lists and networks – is one way of focusing love, care and compassion on those we know. Longing is expressed in worship – on our own and together. Longing widens our horizons: 'Your kingdom come...' When the love of God is met with the longing of God's people, discernment occurs, insight is revealed.

How strongly do we LONG for things to be different? In our churches? In our communities? Are we comfortable with things as they are, how we've become accustomed to them being?? As we long for the Kingdom to come – we need to be for the disruptions, the overturning of the familiar? Am I – are you – ready to take risks for future mission? Open to the surprises of the Spirit of God?

I often reflect on the story of John Fawcett and Dan Taylor from the 18th century; two young pastors who met together for study and prayer with John's wife Susannah and others up in the hills above Hebden Bridge. Nothing particularly special there, then? In fact, there were significant differences in theological outlook here; John was a particular Baptist and Dan a general Baptist. Yet with mutual respect – they were both to become leading figures of our denomination. I share this story because I yearn for that longing to study scripture and pray together with those who may see things differently ... so that, together, we can press on into deeper Kingdom truth. And let us not neglect intercessory prayer for the world. In my observations, this easily gets squeezed out in our worship.

When our longing touches the longing of God in Christ, our capacity for compassion is increased. Genuine compassion is compelling ... The visions and dreams of a Pentecost people are realised as we pray and study Scripture, we see bigger pictures of Kingdom which confront our small visions, challenging us to change, to convert us into deeper visions of the Kingdom. This can be very painful – but real growth usually involves real pain.

Let us reclaim LONGING – with the compassion of Christ

3. **And thirdly, ATTRACTIVE THROUGH LIFE TOGETHER.** So ... loving ... longing ... life together.



Paul prays constantly with joy (v 4-5); *'Because of your life together in the Gospel'*. The phrase here 'life together' has often been translated as 'fellowship'. But this profound New Testament word has become weakened, diluted ... 'fellowship over a cup of tea', 'enjoying fellowship together'.

These CAN be very important expressions - but I believe we need to reclaim the whole riches of the word 'fellowship' as shared common life and deep connectedness. Sometimes this word is translated as 'partnership' or 'networking'. Whichever word is used, we recognise that we cannot live out the Gospel alone. We need each other – in order to fulfil the mission mandate. Interdependence needs to be rediscovered. As we are called to be partners with God in creation, we seek to mirror this in our life together.

As a family, we will never forget our visit to South Africa and our trip to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for over 20 years. In his autobiography 'Long Walk to Freedom', he writes:

'But the authorities' greatest mistake was to keep us together, for together our determination was reinforced; we supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whoever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared and by sharing we multiplied what courage we had individually ... The stronger raised up the weaker ones and both became stronger in the process ...'

What a picture of life together!

I remind us all of our Baptist Union Values Statement, which reads:

'We will develop our shared life, with its primary focus to support, serve and nurture local expressions of church in all their forms.'

To achieve this, we need a renewed spirit of life together in the body of Christ. There is ONE Jesus Christ and where this is caught, we are called to work together – whether through ecumenical partnerships or new networks across churches. It is indeed 'better together'. We ARE stronger together.

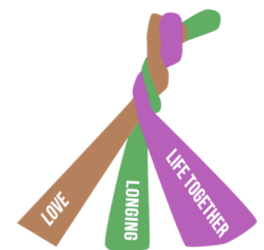
Joint action strengthens our witness in the public square – internationally, nationally and locally as prophetically we speak the truth to power. This is as relevant now as it's always been - where we see cuts having the most impact on the most vulnerable. It was

encouraging to watch the BBC News on Easter Sunday evening when the leading headline was the prophetic statement from the free churches - including BUGB - and Church of Scotland about this. Coordinated responses from across our churches will have the greatest impact.

Life together can be costly:

- In the way we do things together, are we ready to move out of our comfort zone and venture for mission in fresh ways? Perhaps with more team structures across churches and communities, specialising in youth, evangelism and community development, pastoral – using ordained and lay. There is so much untapped resource among our lay people
- Yes costly in terms of finance too. In chapter 4 here Paul expresses gratitude for the financial support of the church at Philippi. It is right that, as Baptist, among our financial giving we give special priority to Home Mission and BMS World Mission. Both are practical expressions of our longing to spread the compassion of Christ across the world
 - **Being ‘attractive through our life together’**
- If our life together is to be deepened, we need to learn to trust each other more as is essential in any relationship. Trust involves a ‘letting go’ of some of our independence.

So three strands here in helping make Jesus Christ attractive to all: through loving, longing and in our life together. When life together is under strain, we are drawn to God’s love command and God’s overflowing grace in Jesus Christ. When we are tempted to turn inwards and get stuck, the Holy Spirit tries to nudge us into a deeper longing to connect.



God, like a weaver, ever takes all the different strands on the loom and seeks to create something new for the Kingdom. Tonight I invite us all to offer our love, our longing, our life together to be woven in God’s hands - so that the world will be attracted - THROUGH US - to Jesus Christ and catch the glorious infection of the Kingdom. AMEN

SILENT REFLECTION

ALL:

***Weaver God, open our eyes afresh to the mystery and power of your Spirit.
Refresh us with the light of your vision,
Re-attach us to your loom
so that your vision may radiate through us In
our loving, longing and life together. In the name of Christ, AMEN***