

Who do you think you are?

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[0 : 00] I've already referred to last week in particular to the things that have happened amongst us over the last 10 years. And I appreciate that some of this may be of more immediate interest to those who know the church.

And it's very lovely to have people who know the church from a long time back as well. But I'll just reflect on the past 10 years because over that period of time, significant things have happened amongst us.

And we ought to remember that. We ought to note the things that have happened because much of this has been matter of prayer. And therefore, we are very concerned that we should give honour to God in saying that this is a matter of answered prayer.

So 10 years ago, you wouldn't actually be meeting in this hall at all, would you? We're actually meeting in the back hall there because this was out of use. The building was in a rather poor way. There was large uncertainty as to whether we should be here at all. So the fact that we can say the things that I've said already this morning about the fact that we're buying the building is a remarkable providence.

[1 : 19] And the kindness of God, a seal of his saying, this is where I want you to be. And that's what he's done for us.

So when we first came here, there was really just a handful of children meeting together. Now it's delightful to be able to say there's up to 18 children meeting regularly here on a Sunday.

Great that we have a real problem in terms of looking after them in the Sunday club. That's a wonderful development.

Many prayers have been prayed about young families. Getting families in the church. And one by one, the Lord has answered those prayers. And you may be part of that.

Answer prayer. And it's wonderful when that's happened. Pleased to say that membership has grown. Probably about 50% increase in church membership here.

[2 : 22] We're still a very small group, but the membership has grown. We're meeting people more regularly in this neighborhood than was certainly the case 10 years ago.

So every week, Ben and others are going out with a book table, meeting people in London Road, meeting people in the neighborhood. And from time to time, we've had some specific and great encouragements in terms of the conversations that have taken place.

And we can feel quite down about all the statistics about people's lack of interest and so on. But I just want to encourage you to know that God is still at work.

He's still making people aware of their need and interested in him. And we want to be very much involved in God's purposes in that way.

And then I suppose over the last two or three years, we've been expressing concern for the next generation. Who are going to pick up the baton in the future days? Who are going to be the elders and deacons, the Sunday club leaders?

[3 : 30] Who are going to take on responsibilities throughout the church? The baton needs to be passed on to a next generation. There are too many churches where that baton has never got passed on.

And the church has just died with the people. It seems to me to be sort of contrary to the whole thrust and encouragement of the scriptures, which is that there should be a new generation who hear of the doings of the Lord and are pleased to take up their responsibilities to be following him. Concern for the next generation. That's been our prayer. We've seen some signs of answers in that prayer. Wonderful that we have a young adults group meeting at this time.

Twelve people were meeting on Thursday night. Twelve young people actually opening their Bibles at Genesis chapter 8, studying the Bible, praying together. Young people doing that.

That is great. And we'd love to see that embedded in for future days. So, I bring you those encouragements because they are.

[4 : 44] But all of those encouragements have an area of fragility about them and maybe that's the way the Lord blesses his people. He blesses us but keeps us needy. And there's no certainties associated with extrapolating that information to the future just because we are where we are now.

So, what happens next? What are the next steps? Building projects is clear, it's tangible, but building the church, the kingdom, that's not so clear.

That's why we're having this Vision Day on Saturday the 14th of June to invite all who care for the church in its present and future. Now, how do we go about thinking about the future of the church? Well, it's no bad thing for us to see what God has done in the past because it is an encouragement for us to sense the providence of his directions.

And I think we can do that in our own lives as well. We can see the way that he has led us. And he's not a capricious, erratic God. He only takes us down the paths that he wants us to go down so that we might learn what we need to learn through those processes.

[5 : 58] And generally speaking, if God has begun to do something, he wants to carry it on. And so we take encouragement from that. But I'd like to suggest that as we come to that Vision Day and as we think about the church, that we always need to be keeping a couple of questions in mind.

And the first is to remember who God is. It would be very dangerous for us just to look at the things that God does and to forget the God he is, his character, his nature, the sort of God that he is like. We need to remember that and we need to see it in a Bible way. That's one of the grand encouragements of coming together on a Sunday like we do here. We are reminded of the nature of God, the real God.

Not the God that the world thinks about. What does the world think about this God even if it existed, this higher power of some sort?

Well, many people would say that we have a God who is completely indifferent to the world, even if he made it. He's so distant from it. And he doesn't really care about it.

[7 : 16] He doesn't care how people behave. There isn't any difference in his eyes between what's good and what's bad. And so on. So people feel they can live their lives in complete ignorance of this God.

Well, wouldn't you? If God was like that. If God was just some sort of impersonal machine in the heavens with no interest in you.

But we come to the Bible and we read in Proverbs 15 verse 3, the eyes of the Lord are everywhere, watching over the good and the wicked.

And so one verse of the Bible, we find all this sort of grand tissue of unbelief, which is out there in the world, completely demolished.

Who is this God? He's not out there. He's a God who's here. And a God who's looking at us and who sees us, who reads our minds and our hearts.

[8 : 15] And he understands us perfectly. He knows everything about us. He knew us from our mother's womb.

He'll be with us on our deathbeds. He sees all of that. He sees all of our life. Not only does he see what has happened, but he knows what is going to happen.

What a mighty God this is. Does he care about the way that you live? Very much so. Very concerned about the way that you are. He reads your thoughts.

He judges it. He weighs it up. Well, there's that sort of a God. If the world thinks about God at all, sees him as a God who's completely impotent.

Not only is he indifferent, he's impotent. He doesn't change anything. The watchmaker who set all this going, but he doesn't intervene.

[9 : 18] But we can't read many pages of the Bible without seeing that we have a God who does intervene, constantly intervenes, and supremely so, in sending his son, Jesus Christ, to this world to die in a most specific way that had been predicted on behalf of wicked people.

Well, there's a measure of the intervention of God, his marvelous power to intervene. Who could have thought it, that God could find a way to be just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus?

How could his holy character be satisfied and yet him to show mercy to people like you and me? Well, it's all God's work, isn't it?

It's all God's work. It's his perfect purpose, being fulfilled. Did it all finish 2,000 years ago?

By no means. The spirit of Jesus Christ is abroad in the world, speaking to men and women and boys and girls as he is today. And what a wonderful and privileged place we are today to have a God who speaks to us, who has purposes for us, purposes for you and purposes for this church, purposes for this world.

[10:46] His purpose is that Jesus Christ should be glorified. His purpose is that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Well, we can't understand the fullness of his purpose, but purpose there certainly is and he is not impotent. The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is the power that is at work in the life of every single believer.

That's not impotence. Power to change lives. Persons going in one sort of direction and their life is completely changed around. That's God's power.

That's not impotence. God does things that only God could do. Well, this is God we need to think about as we come to Vision Day.

We need to remember this sort of God. Because our tendency is always to make our God very little. Accommodated to our very restricted vision.

[11:54] But we know that God is so much greater. The God of the Bible is so much greater than the poverty of our current experience. So as we think about the future your future and the future of the church we need to reckon with this particular God.

Not the convenient God that we boxed up and put into our own little world that suits our way of living but a God who is outside of that who is far far greater and bigger and yet comes near to us it is grace and mercy in Jesus Christ.

Christ. And there's another question we need to think about and it concerns ourselves.

Remember who we are according to the Bible. Who are we according to the Bible? people have their own views about themselves and so forth and it's very important for a Christian people to have Bible views about themselves.

Not to see themselves as the world sees them but to see themselves as God sees them in Jesus Christ. And to think about the church in that way as well.

[13:14] What is the church like? That's the question I'm going to be putting to you quite shortly. Now I had a conversation on Friday with one of the local traders and he didn't know I came from Calvary Church.

He did when I paid for the paint and went on the wall afterwards. So Calvary Church. But I had the same conversation with him as I've had had with him about two years ago.

And basically he was saying the church needs to get out of its ivory tower. The church should be about getting out into the world and doing good. Being good to people.

I mean I could have said well what about you? Why aren't you doing that? But you know basically he's saying that's their job. The job of the church is to get out of the churches and just do good in the world.

Can't argue with that. But it's not the big picture. It's not the main picture. We are not a branch of the social services.

[14:18] We are not part of the NHS. If God intended for the church to be that I'm sure he would have set things up in a different way and I'm rather convinced that he wouldn't have sent Jesus Christ to die upon the cross.

What are the things that God is concerned about? How does he view his church, his people?

What's our first responsibility? As a church.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and love your neighbour as yourself. Well we could begin to just be fed by the ideas of people in the world about what the church should be.

I'm afraid to say that in many ways much of the church has gone in that direction. And people have said why aren't you doing this? The church has said oh okay we'll do it.

But that's not the first place to look. We're not going to go out with a survey to the local traders and people in London Road and say to them what would you like the church to do?

[15 : 33] What would you like the church to do? We're not going to do that because if we want to understand what the church is and what the church should be doing we read our Bibles and we find out what God has to say what his view his attitude is that is our responsibility.

We're not here to obey the world we're here to obey the God who has saved us. The church is like I've given you those pieces of paper there I'd like you to actually write down what you think the church can be likened to.

Can you think of some examples? Of course I'm encouraging you to think of the Bible pictures of the church not all the kind of funny and fancy ideas that people might have but what is genuinely your idea of what the church is?

The church is like something. Put down two or three different thoughts. I'll give you a couple of minutes to do that. If you're a bit stuck have a chat with your neighbour.

Okay so hold on to those thoughts for the moment I'll come back to you and ask you what you've put down here but I want to start off by suggesting who do you think you are?

[16 : 58] Who do you think you are? That's a very good question to ask. Some people see themselves as products of their past and indeed in a way we are products of our past here as well and that's what I'm thinking about this morning.

What is the church like according to the Bible? I want to suggest one or two inadequate models. Inadequate models.

The first is this. A school or a university? Okay University of Sussex rather blurred in the background there. Great place.

Who goes to University of Sussex? Anybody here? Deborah. Fantastic. We've had a long and noble tradition of people from the University of Sussex. Phil himself was the president of the CU in Sussex University way before many of your times.

University is great. If you're going to it and you're heading in that direction I give you every encouragement. Is the church like a school or a university? A little.

[18 : 11] That's a good answer. A little. A little. We need to learn. We come here in order to learn what God has to say. We need teachers in the church so that the word of God can be taught and teaching is about material going into our minds so that our minds will be changed as a result of the teaching.

We will be clear in what we believe. The Bible is full of words and full of teaching. This is a logical book.

One can read the Bible in order to have our minds transformed. Teaching is good. Learning is good. But learning is not the end.

Learning in the mind is not the end. I think it would be a bit of a risky life project for any of you to think I'm going to spend the rest of my life at a university.

Perpetual students. I've known a few in my time. Understanding if you go from a place of learning to a place of teaching others to be doing so.

[19 : 28] But I don't think it's enough to be able to think of the church as a place of learning. There's a verse in Timothy which says ever learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

People who just like the idea of learning. And the Bible is fascinating in that kind of way because you can use it in that kind of way.

You can be very interested in all kinds of aspects to do with the Bible especially matters to do with prophecy and so forth. Learning, learning, learning. I don't think it's an adequate model to describe the church of Jesus Christ.

It's not enough just to come to have your mind corrected and filled. Is the church a holiday park?

A long time ago when our children were small I went to centre parks. Very nice. Very nice for a week. Very nice to do nice holiday things together and so forth.

[20 : 40] I want to assure you if you were in any doubt at all that the church is not a holiday park. The church is not a holiday park. We enjoy our time out.

We enjoy going on our church weekend. We enjoy our barbecue in Stanmore Park. but the church is not about a perpetual barbecue. It's not.

That'd be childish view of the way the church is. Yet some people in a very rough and tough world of course we enjoy that sense of peace and acceptance and togetherness that is found when people come through the door of the church.

you get a nice meal here often next Sunday you come along and have a church lunch and so forth but the church is not fundamentally about having your material needs satisfied.

And nor is the church an experienced voucher. I've never tried this. Has anybody ever tried to do something like this in the room? RG.

[21 : 48] Have you really? Bungee jumped. Amazing. Crazy. Such things.

They're becoming more and more exotic aren't they? I was reading this last week in the Evening Standard about you can get helicopter flights 100 foot above the River Thames and you can go and visit the top of the Shard and have an amazing experience and with just anything you could possibly think of it becomes even more possible now.

Is the church an experience voucher? Well I'm afraid some versions of church seem to sort of major on that idea that the idea is to come together to have an experience.

I need an experience. There are experiences but it's not the fundamental place and purpose of the church of Jesus Christ.

is the church a hospital or a clinic? Is it a hospital or a clinic? This is University College Hospital.

[23 : 02] Wonderful hospital. I had a couple of days in hospital about a month ago. Great but I was pleased to go out of the hospital. We need to be very careful that we don't play the world's tunes and the world's ideas on this and don't turn the church into a place which is essentially a glorified counselling centre.

The church is not fundamentally about psychiatry psychology. Those aren't the fundamental points. Very interesting to read the New Testament epistles and to see how little is said about that sort of a subject. It's a very western 20th 21st century obsession.

I was hearing on Radio 4 this week that there's quite a lot of confusion in the psychiatric and psychological communities at the moment because it's got to the point where the professionals can't decide in the end what normal looks like.

What is normal? And they're saying that many people have been misdiagnosed as abnormal because they don't fit some particular little kind of pattern that the professionals have decided means normal.

[24 : 36] Are you normal? Do you need psychiatric help?

Do you need psychological help? Well you may do but on the other hand you may not do. We have many people coming into this church who have needs and we seek to deal with it graciously and pastorally and appropriately.

But I want to carefully say that the main function of this church is not to be a hospital or a clinic. It is not to be constantly saying of one another you're sick you're sick you're sick you're sick you're sick. What's the fundamental problem with all these models that I've just been describing? What's the fundamental problem with them? God is missing anything else you want to say about those?

Same RG carry on worldly yeah you think about them they're very self-focused they're very self-focused I need an experience I need treatment I need to be taught I think that's a giveaway appropriate models now I'd like to hear what you've been writing down on your sheet of paper as you think is appropriate model so if you've got something would you like to put your hand up and then I'll give you opportunity just to shout out Margaret great that's a good one God's representatives on earth thank you we've all heard that Mark a family good man carry on one body fantastic

[27 : 08] Zach church church like a vine very good yep that's good Ray the redeemed people of God the redeemed people of God good answers anyone else Kwa God I got part of that the house where you belong and still part of the big society like that very much right anybody up in the gallery want to say anything it's good to have you with us our summer an army fantastic RG part two fruitful part of the tree right thank you it's very good anybody else want to add anything

Anita you look as if you're about living as the body of Christ thank you these are good answers and a family that is a good answer a family is a good answer turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 2 verse 11 it's such a common picture sometimes the word families use more often than not it's just people are called brothers or sisters that's family isn't it I like this picture because it shows a multi generational family as grandparents parents and children Paul talks about having children in the Lord many of you don't have fathers in Christ speaks about how we should relate to older people that picture of a family that's that's very helpful and

I appreciate as we think about a group of people in here not all of you may have had the sort of family that you might aspire to your human family but the Christian family is meant to be a most wonderful set of relationships Hebrews 2 verse 11 both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family we are united together and united together under the head of the family who is Jesus Christ you won't go far wrong with the picture of the family the church is like a family but it's not the only picture there is a picture of the body I think we heard that earlier thank you 1 Corinthians 12 the whole of that chapter is about the body and you remember he speaks about the body how it every part relates to every other part how there are connections there's sinews and tendons and there's muscles and the like there are some parts of the body that are less acceptable if you like acceptable or less presentable and they need to be cared for there are sort of weak parts of the body and stronger parts there are more visible parts there are more hidden parts but it's all one body and to be a Christian is to be made a member of the body but I believe that we can and we should relate that to a local church family and say that if you're a member of a local church family you're a member of the body and it isn't just that we have relationships with each other but that we depend upon one another we need one another the parts are not the same we are not all eyes and ears and noses and feet we all have a different part to play that's one of the things that we need to think about very carefully on vision day what part of the body am I what part of this body am I and it's not acceptable to say I'm no part it's an important prayer to ask what part I am and then to carry on and do it not to hanker after being some other part of the body but to be pleased with what God has asked us to do put our hand up for it and say that's the part I want to play that's the part I believe God has gifted me for I have too few of those conversations but as an elder of the church I would love to hear more people putting things back to me and saying well you know I feel actually that these are the areas of my gifting these are the sorts of things that I would love to be doing and so I don't know how it can work out yet but we need to have those conversations and we need to recognise the giftings within one another so that we could say I really think you're an excellent ear you are an excellent ear you might never have thought that before but we need to have those conversations a spiritual house somebody mentioned house

I think we heard it twice in different ways that's a very exotic sort of house isn't it 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 5 says this as you come to him the living stone rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him you also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood you're being built into a spiritual house we love our building but one day this will all come down but the spiritual house that God is building will last forever the display of his glory the beauty of it the riches of it there will be nothing like it no example on earth will be in any comparison to the beauty and the glory of the house which God is building these are appropriate models a family is about relationships a body is how we function a building is the results and even now something is being built which is glorious in the eyes of heavenly places and the angels in heaven watch with wonder at the works of God amongst his people on earth isn't that a privilege for us to be part of that today so people say we're just a branch of the social services just there to be a food bank well you read the bible we're a family we're a body we're a building it's massive isn't it it's enormous it's a 24-7 way of being but I believe there is a missing model from most of our natural thinking although our seminar lit upon it and that's what we're going to look at just briefly this morning it is briefly and we're just going to read this is our reading now this morning

[35 : 00] Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10 to 18 page 1177 finally says Paul at the end of this letter to the Ephesian church read out I'm quite sure in a circumstance very similar to ours here finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil schemes for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!

stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist with the breastplate of righteousness in place and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace in addition to all this take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God and pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests with this in mind be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints we kind of moved into another territory we read these words don't we many times when a passage like this has been looked at it's been particularly directed and

applied to the individual Christian and indeed it has an application a big application to the individual Christian and our lives but it is directed to every Christian and therefore in a group like this this is a word that is directed to all of us without exception and the things that we could put an I before we also need to put a we before as well we need to put on the full armour of God we need to take the helmet of salvation which is the word of God we need to stand firm we need to have our feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace we need to take up a shield of faith these are the things that we corporately need to do and the and therefore the the missing model as I might put it indeed the army it is the army because there is a war there's a war within us in

Romans chapter 7 the apostle Paul speaks very eloquently on this matter so much so that people have said well he could hardly be a Christian could he if he speaks in this kind of way I think he's absolutely a Christian when he speaks in this kind of way he's only speaking what he finds to be truth I find this law at work when I want to do good evil is right there with me for in my inner being I delight in God's law but I see another law at work in the members of my body waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members it's all the language of war of battle and he's saying it's me the apostle Paul yeah he's saying it's me that's who I am that's the kind of daily conflict that I'm having when I want to do good evil is present with me have you ever been really troubled by that thought even saying to yourself

I could hardly be a Christian I've been going the Christian life so long and yet even when I want to do good things I find this battle within me well you're in good company we're all in good company together we don't have to hide this matter at all we just have to be honest about it and the word of God has a great deal to say about this war which is inside each one of us and it's a war that's all around us 1 John 2 15 to 17 do not love the world or anything in the world if anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him for everything in the world the cravings of sinful man the lust of his eyes the boasting of what he has and does comes not from the father but from the world the world and its desires pass away but the man who does the will of God lives forever this world I was out and about yesterday great sunny day everybody was enjoying themselves there was a children's parade in the morning wasn't there the place was awash with festival and fringe type events people out there was street clothes for street party and so on there was really great lovely things going on but at the same time another part of me says this is all destined to perish this is all destined to perish and we have to be very careful the world is not a benign place for a

[40 : 29] Christian to be in we're not in a benign environment here in Brighton the whole tendency of this world order is to smother the truth of God the whole tendency is to make the things of Jesus Christ unreal the whole tendency is to elevate man instead of God the whole tendency is to squash and to smother the truth of God's word so that you will leave this place this morning convinced of a certain point but by Wednesday you may just find your mind going in another direction the world is a dangerous place to be and the apostles guard us against it and it's directed by the devil we have a warfare which is directed by the devil Peter says be careful the devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour and he does devour people we're called to fight we're called to overcome and this is the picture which is given in the very last book of the

Bible in Revelation to every single one of the churches which are addressed by the risen Lord Jesus Christ this is his closing word to them to him who overcomes overcomes overcomes that's where the crown of glory lies so the overcomers the people who've got through a battle and have overcome as a result and the world says this is ridiculous and dangerous and Christian people say this is uncomfortable and unpleasant we don't sing many songs about this there aren't many books on the library shelves in Christian households about this issue and we can feel awkward about it after all the days of militarism are long since gone 1914 when people went off gladly to war there's not that sort of sense about it in westernized society today war is a dirty subject fight is a dirty subject surely the church should be about peace but Jesus

Christ himself said I've not come to bring peace but a sword what does that mean there's a battle something we're going to need to deal with if we're going to be a bible believing church is to recognize the reality of that war within us around us and our chief adversary the devil but we do so in the knowledge that only in Jesus Christ only in Jesus Christ we are more than conquerors for everything we're going to have to face well this is part one I want to think in on another Sunday morning about the evidences of this battle and the implications of it for each one of us of Thank you.