

The Church that Changed the World

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Date: 13 March 2010

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you for your word and as we look at it now, we ask Father that you would pour out your spirit amongst us so that we get a glimpse of your all expansive purposes for this world. Help us, Father, to be your church and we ask it for your sake. Amen.

Amen. Please be seated. St Paul's Chatswood had its origin just over 108 years ago. We began with a Sunday school on the 1st of September 1901, but no one actually turned up. Apparently the weather was too bad. Three kids turned up the following week and the first official church service was a couple of months later on the 8th of December 1901. Of course, a new church doesn't just pop up out of nowhere. There are many things happening over a period of time before anything came to be. As always, there were the different motives and agendas that people have in planning a church. As it turns out, apparently there were some who were dissatisfied with ministry at St. Stephen's Willoughby and so wanted to start another church.

There were those who felt the church was a place for good social activities. It was a place for mutual support, friendships, family interaction, cultural pursuits and a healthy place for young people of marriageable age. St Paul's the dating service.

On the other hand, there was the evangelism on steam trains running from here towards the city. A boy riding the district on horseback to break the news of a Sunday school commencing.

And there were four young men who in the summer of 1900-1902 met weekly for prayer before dawn out in the bush and spent time walking around potential sites where God would lead them to plant a church. And here we are today, over 108 years later. A new rector 11 months ago, amalgamation of Hope Anglican with St. Paul's at the beginning of January. Another new congregation, a new and extended staff team, a new mission statement, a new vision before us in Vision 2020.

[2 : 4 3] Even with 108 years of history, there is so much that is new. And so what is it about our origins that will define our future? Which one of those agendas will be the one that will define where we'll be in the future? Are we gathering because we're ticked off by another church and another ministry?

We're here because of the social, cultural or even dating possibilities? Or is it a vision of the fulfillment of God's expansive purposes to proclaim the gospel, to build his church and to bring everything under the cosmic lordship of Jesus?

What sort of church is St. Paul's chats with? Our mission statement says that we exist to know Jesus, treasure Jesus and represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people. Is that us? Are those words actually true for us?

Do we actually exist as a social club or as the purposeful people of God who discover their deepest satisfaction and joy in bringing glory to God?

We commenced our series in the book of Acts, the early chapters of Acts, with a picture of God's expansive purposes through the Lord Jesus Christ for his world. The promise of Acts chapter 1 verse 8 is that Christ would continue his work and teaching in the world by sending the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples for their witness in the world. The whole agenda of Acts is in that verse, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

- [4 : 57] We have seen as we have ventured through Acts that God has consistently been fulfilling his agenda through his servants. God's plan is that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ be preached and that people embrace the Lordship of Christ.

And friends, in case you're not aware of it, the task is not yet finished in this world.

There is still a need for adventurous Christians to leave the emotional security and physical safety of their own society. For people to deliberately to seek to plant churches and to win converts in those cultures where there is little or no witness.

Are there any gathered here today who have that as their vision? Does this church have it as its vision?

And so we end our short series on Acts with that vision before us. The birth of missionary vision in the churches, or to be more accurate, the birth of missionary vision in a church.

- [6 : 29] According to Luke, the first pioneering steps towards planned cross-cultural mission was taken by a single congregation, the church at Antioch.

This is the church that changed the world. And unless you were a Jew, God bless you, then this is your mother church.

As the first Gentile church, this is the church that is to find the heartbeat of the Christian church. And so as we look back to what defines us for the future, as we look back into our past and what defines us for our future here at St. Paul's, I want to take us back.

I want to take us right back, past 108 years, right back to Antioch. Our mother church, our ancestry, our bloodline, the church that is to define us for the future.

There are so many things that could be highlighted and celebrated about this church. Their incredible generosity to the brothers and sisters in Judea in providing resources for them.

- [7 : 44] Their amazing commitment to send their best leaders off into new ministry adventures and to actually have their leadership team to send them off into plant other churches.

Incredible things. But there are three things that I want to particularly draw out that are closely connected and intertwined. These are the things that ought to characterize St. Paul's Chatswood.

And the first mark of this church at Antioch that needs to characterize us is its focus on mission. Verse 19. Follow along in your service sheet or in your Bibles.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

- [8 : 45] The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 11.19 takes us back to chapter 8.1, the scattering of the believers as the result of the persecution related to Stephen's martyrdom.

First of all, there was Philip. Then there was Peter, who carried the seed of the Christian message into new soil. Now we see some of these persecuted believers went as far as Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria.

Now, merely verbalizing the indwelling witness of Christ in their hearts, I suspect they were not even aware that they were doing anything radical at all.

These unnamed Jews from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene, with no official direction, no human instruction, no precedent to follow, nothing but a burning love for the Lord Jesus Christ, took the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to Antioch without realizing the revolutionary greatness of their act.

They were the first believers to bring the explosive light of the gospel into the pitch black darkness of paganism that was Antioch.

[10 : 22] Antioch was evangelized, not by apostles, but by ordinary, average members of Christ's body who were willing to share their faith.

Wherever these fugitives landed, they kindled a flame. And God, through his spirit, fanned it. Sharing Christ to them was as natural as tears to sorrow or a smile to happiness.

Everyday believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, blew away the hold of paganism on needy souls. And the result was a great harvest in Antioch.

Verse 21, The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. We see it again in verse 24. A great number of people were brought to the Lord.

It's incredible. No apostles. No parish council. No ecclesiastical structures. Just the Lord's hand.

[11 : 36] And a tremendous number of new believers. Luke is very careful to stress the sovereign providence of God's mighty hand in the growth of church here.

It was the hand of the Lord that was primarily responsible for the success of this church. But it didn't negate the personal witness of the believers.

He chose to use these people to accomplish his sovereign purposes. There is absolutely no doubt at all that God could have chosen some other way.

He could have found some supernatural way to turn these Gentiles to himself. But he chose to use the testimony of ordinary, ordinary disciples.

This is his appointed means. And for that reason, no church will ever become a missionary church unless it possesses a vigorous grassroots concern for mission to the non-Christian world where it stands.

[12 : 51] If it is not concerned for local evangelism on its doorstep, it is not really concerned for mission thousands and thousands of kilometres away.

And too many churches say that they are a missionary church and they operate like a lighthouse.

Illuminating far off distance but casting its base in utter darkness. Illuminating far off distance.

Six and a half thousand unreached people groups in the world today. Six and a half thousand unreached groups who have no Christian witness, no church planted there.

And that is out of a total of 16,309 ethno-linguistic groups in the world. There is still an enormous task to be achieved.

[14 : 22] And frankly, as I wandered through the streets of Chatswood, I can't help but believe that God has given St. Paul's an unprecedented opportunity.

If not already, then I suspect that representatives from some of those unreached groups are right here. We would call them our neighbours.

And yet, unless God ordains it, we will never have contact with them.

And unless we are courageous, we will never have contact with them. It is quite unlikely that they will ever come to us and ever want to know the gospel.

They are blinded to the needs of the gospel. And so are we asking God to do it? Are we asking God in his mighty hand to establish that contact?

[15 : 22] Are we fasting and pleading with God to allow us the opportunity to establish that contact, for him to shift a person's heart to bow the knee to Jesus and confess him as Lord and all, to partner with us in equipping that person as a church planner and to send them back to their people group and to resource and to plan a church and establish it where there is no church?

Do we have that vision? Do we have that vision? Maybe two weeks' time in Chatswood Mall is God's time.

And God can use St. Paul's Chatswood to take it from 6,500 to 6,499. Is that the vision that's before us?

The second mark of Antioch that needs to define St. Paul's was its focus on establishing the believers in the faith. God's heart is to keep pushing, keep pushing and keep pushing and keep pushing beyond the fringe.

And he can use all sorts of means to push us beyond the fringe. It happened with the death of Stephen. We kind of don't really want him to do it that way amongst us, but if that's what it takes, then he can do it to keep pushing us beyond the fringe.

[16 : 52] But the people he uses to lead this are well-established in their understanding of the gospel of grace. Well-established people. Superficial Christian people or superficial Christian message leads to superficial evangelism.

Shallow Christians result in shallow evangelism and a preaching of an anemic counterfeit of the gospel of grace.

The church in Jerusalem gets wind of what's happening down in Antioch, and so they send one of its main men to check it out, Barnabas the encourager. The one who stood up for Paul and vouched for him in front of the church leaders in Jerusalem.

What a great choice to send down to Antioch. A man who was open. Barnabas likes what he sees there, but his concern is that these Christians become well-established in the faith.

And so he goes and even seeks extra help in order to make it happen. Verse 25. Then Barnabas went down to Tarsus to look for Saul. I think the last time he saw Saul was about eight to ten years earlier.

[18 : 07] There's a long period of time since he last saw him. He goes and gets him. He found him. He brought him back to Antioch. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

Great numbers of people were taught the truth. And what were they taught? I think Acts 20 verse 27 leads me to believe that they were taught the whole will of God.

Not just seven basic Bible studies. The whole will of God. The emphasis on establishment is seen again in chapter 14 when the missionaries return, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them and appointing elders.

Everything that this church does and is comes back to God's grace and the fact that they were well-established in the truth. I think, however, sometimes in our passion for mission, mission particularly for the mission that God has given us, we make the mistake of the thinking that the church should just be concerned with evangelism.

That that's our primary business. As if somehow the establishment of new believers is not important. The mission-minded church at Antioch would not agree.

[19 : 31] The church of God is to be well-established then and now. Under God's direction, pressing out with the gospel of grace to the next street, the next suburb, the next city, the next country.

What part are you playing in establishing the believers in the faith at St. Paul's Chatswood? Do you think it's my job? Chris's job?

John Dunn's job? Who here will establish Nicky in the faith? Sorry for pointing you out there. Who here will establish Nicky in the faith?

St. Paul's, therefore, also needs to be a church defined by, I think, the third mark of this church in Antioch, and that is its leadership.

Verse 24 says that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Chapter 3, verse 1 says that the church in Antioch, there were prophets and teachers.

[20 : 47] It's Barnabas' character, not his skill, that stands out here. It would seem to me that this church's leadership was also bent towards the ministry of the word of God in having both prophets and teachers.

Leaders who live the word of God, who stand out in their character, not their skill, and who minister the word of God for the establishment of the church.

It is probably not surprising then that after this church was well established in the truth, they became so sensitive to the leading of God and responding generously.

It was while five leaders were worshipping and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke clearly to them. In Luke 5, verse 35, Jesus makes it clear that such fasting is appropriate after the bridegroom has gone.

And the early church probably saw fasting as a means of preparing to hear the guiding voice of God. To hunger, not just in their stomach, but to hunger for God's leading.

[22 : 02] Here is a well-taught church showing clear evidence of God's grace in its repentance and faith, but it also shows a sensitive, careful hearing of the prophetic word, either through a human prophet or directly from the Spirit.

And in both cases, the response of the church show how seriously they took God's direction. I want to be a church that hungers for God's leading.

I want to be surrounded by leadership and staff, parish council, wardens. I want us to put into place nominators, synod reps who are sensitive to God's leading and hungering for God's leading as we take step by step moving forward into Vision 2020.

I suspect that Saul, Barnabas and the other leaders in Antioch would have been asking the question, where to now? We're from Antioch.

What is the next big thing that you have on our agenda, Lord? You could call it master planning, if you like.

[23 : 30] And most of the questions that we need to answer are not explicitly answered in the Bible. The ones with clear biblical answers don't need leadership team to discern.

It's pretty clear from the scriptures. Most of the questions that are pressing on us are, do we start a new mission venture? Do we plant another church?

When, how, who, where? Should we redevelop this site and what should it look like? And how much money should we spend on it? Should we purchase those properties over the road or the ones down the next suburb?

What is the next staff requirement? Should we start a school here? What sort of congregation should we plant next? Those are the thousands and thousands and thousands of decisions that we face every day as a church.

And year after year. Those are the nature of the questions that leadership teams grapple with. And the Bible is not explicit on the answer of those questions.

[24 : 29] And with the weight of such decisions upon us as a church, I want to be calling us as a church to be prayerful, fasting, and hungering for God's leading.

So what sort of church is St. Paul's Chatswood? I think it's, I don't think it's forced, but each one of our family values is reflected in this church at Antioch.

Not all explicitly, but humble authenticity, radical generosity, servant leadership, local and global impact, devotion to prayer, and Christ-centered Bible saturation.

They're not all explicit, but they're there. Are they the things that define us as a church? Are they truly the things that define us as a church? How would you define us?

Or more importantly, how would the community of Chatswood define us, do you think? How would God define us?

[25 : 41] Do you know what I think one of the most wonderful, heartwarming statements in this text here, and I think it's almost a throwaway line. You just read over it.

You don't take much notice of it. But it's so incredible when you look at it. It's there in verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

You see, this church at Antioch was like a flower in a bog. It was like a flower growing out of a bog.

It's like this beautiful green, putting green, if you like, in the vastness of Death Valley Desert. This church was so foreign to this bleak environment that it actually altered the vocabulary of the city.

And from there, the entire world. When God's people live for Christ in such power and such depth that those around them have to strive to come up with a new term in order to describe what they see, what do you call that?

[27 : 05] Amazing. That's what you call it. Perhaps there was jesting and mocking, a little bit of an edge to this nickname.

Perhaps it was a bit of rage because these people were such a contradiction to the ethos of Antioch. The new term, part Greek, part Latin, was actually a mongrel name.

But it said it all. Christian. Followers of Christ. Christ was so much on these believers' lips that they lived so much like Christ.

There was no name that could describe them. So we had to think of one. What name would the people of Chatswood give to the people of St Paul's?

Imagine if there was such a spiritual dynamic operating amongst us causing people to come up with a new name to describe that bunch of lunatics at St Paul's Chatswood.

[28 : 38] Alexander the Great once learned that in his army that there was another Alexander. Alexander, who was a notorious coward. Alexander, the man who conquered the world at the age of 23, called the soldier before him and said, is your name Alexander and have you been named after me?

The trembling coward said, yes sir, my name is Alexander and I have been named after you. and the great general paused for a moment and he said, then I suggest to you Alexander either be brave or change your name.

Either be brave, either be Christian St Paul's Chatswood or change your name.

Once St Paul's was a young, newly founded North Shore Antioch and we praise God that in his 108 years this church has been a passionate sending and strengthening Jerusalem church.

but as we sit here today I think we know that some of that has been lost but praise God not all of it and as we launch into the future my deep commitment my heartfelt prayer and with God's enabling I and the leadership of St Paul's will make us worthy of the name Christiane follower of Christ.

[30 : 31] Let's pray. Our gracious Father help us to be loyal, brave, committed followers of Christ who refuse to turn back who dare to stand firm and to make Christ's name known to all around who desire with your divine enabling to shine the light of the glory of Christ in a dark, dark world.

We ask you Father that in your great providence with your mighty hand that you might open up to us new horizons of your expansive purposes in this world.

Save people and build your church we pray. Amen. Amen.