

“A CHURCH AT THE HEART OF THE CITY”

Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 54:2

We're going to do something a little different this morning, so I hope you'll bear with me. Next week, as you'll have seen from your notice sheet or this month's *Vision*, is to be a gift day for the new church development fund. The trouble is, some of you, who have joined the church in recent months, don't really know what this development idea is all about. Others of you, who have been here for a while, have never really grasped what's going on. Others of you have forgotten – and we all need to have our memories refreshed as to the state of play at the moment.

So we're going to go back to the beginning and look at the way in which the vision for this church has developed and what the vision actually is. We're going to grasp the vision together and then consider what we need to do to fulfil it. Some of you will have heard a lot of this before. Some of you might even find this a bit bewildering. Bits of it might be a bit out of date because things have moved on, but bear with me. Behind everything that is said this morning, I believe God is at work – and what he is saying is for us to hear and to respond to at this time.

First, some history. When this church was built in 1812, its ministry drew in many people. Within three years the rear gallery had to be added. Soon after that the side galleries were built to accommodate the growing congregation. Expansion is not a new idea. Although, by the middle of the twentieth century the congregation had dwindled, there were still people who felt that this place had a future and the buildings needed both to reflect that sense of hope and to be glorifying to God: and we can be grateful to God for their persistence in prayer and preaching. You can see the state of the buildings in 1979 on the photos that were in the porch, and there are people who can tell you about the refurbishment of the interior which went on in the 80's. But for quite some years now there has been talk of church improvement and a vision of the future which sees this building as a vital resource for the sharing of the gospel in the heart of this city of Lichfield.

The need for something to be done has been highlighted in the last decade or so by the growth that has occurred in the numbers attending the church. The gallery is in use once again. Extra space has been created in here by the removal of the pipe organ and the reorganisation of the seating. Improved facilities have been provided in the hall, but there is still enormous pressure on the Junior Church and youth activities - to the extent that we had to hire rooms in another church for some groups, and have recently bought No. 36, the house next door. If we want to develop the programme of the church and provide a better base for our mission in this city (of which, more later), then what we have here is not adequate.

God has been blessing us (almost in spite of ourselves) and we want to move forward in step with that. Various plans and schemes have been drawn up and discussed. We have considered and researched planting other congregations and using other buildings. Architects and other experts have been consulted, but nothing has actually been done other than tinkering around the edges. Back in 1998, however, two things happened which helped to clarify our thinking. Firstly, the TSB left its building opposite the church to merge with Lloyd's Bank in Dam Street and the vacant building was put up for sale. A group of people from the church went to have a look at it to think about whether it would be a possible answer to our need for more facilities. Some of us got quite excited by the possibilities.

At about the same time, Tina Cadwallader (one of our church members who was then serving with YWAM in Chile) shared with the elders what she felt was a clear word from God that we should carefully consider what he was saying to us through *Isaiah 54*, from which we read earlier. She couldn't home in on any particular verse, but was sure that we needed to look carefully at it. That formed the focus for a day of prayer and discussion that the church leaders spent at St Mary's Abbey January of 1999.

Isaiah 54 is a chapter of enormous encouragement and is part of the great Messianic prophecy which provides hope and assurance for God's people. Within the context of God's great blessing and his promise of provision and restoration we were drawn to v2. I know that when we're looking at what God has to say to us through Scripture we need to be aware of the context and beware of reading our own ideas into the text, but these words were clearly being used by God to speak to us at this time. It is a challenge to move forward, to prepare for expansion, to reach out beyond ourselves.

In this verse we saw the twin aims of "*lengthening the cords*" and "*strengthening the stakes*". The first, we felt, challenged us to develop our resources, and in particular our premises, so that we had a larger "*tent*" in which to operate. The second is a reminder that we need to continue building up what is already here in terms of our own faith and discipleship. Go forward, it seemed to be saying, but don't forget why you're here. We prayed around this for some time and felt sure enough of what God was saying to share it with the Church Members' Meeting. There was a unanimous feeling that we needed to move on to examine the options and test what God was saying. So, as is the way with these things, a committee was set up to examine our options and bring some firm proposals to the next Church Members' Meeting. In the mean time there was to be a special day of prayer.

When the committee met, I think we were all a bit surprised at how quickly and how easily we came to a common mind on the matter. It seemed to us a further confirmation that God was really at work in all of this. Not only did we all agree on the option of developing the present site and making it a single base for our activities, but we felt very excited by the overall concept which came out of that. And one of the group (Ann Badcock) shared with us another passage from the Bible which she felt God was saying we should take very seriously.

That passage was a section from Matthew's gospel: *Matthew 12*. Like Tina, Ann wasn't sure exactly what God was wanting to tell us through it, but as we talked it over and prayed about it, we felt that v19 was the verse we needed to focus on. There was an encouragement there that this plan would not cause any quarrelling among us and a reminder to us that it was a project for God's people - there should be no crying out in the streets, no high profile public appeals - a sense that God would provide without our having to keep shouting about the need for resources. So we showed the Church Meeting the following presentation.

[Power Point presentation]

The encouragement was confirmed when the next Church Members' Meeting unanimously passed the plan and demonstrated its eagerness to get going with no arguments or hesitation. Brian Keeling, the former treasurer of the church, seemed to confirm the second part when he testified to God's provision for everything that the Church had ever set out to do: if God wants it done, he will work through his people to provide the finance.

So there we were. In a sense, the easy part was done. We now faced a round of planning discussions with the people who have the responsibility of ensuring that everything is done properly as far as the local conservation area, listed buildings regulations and denominational expectations are concerned. So far, it has been clear that God has been at work - from the ways in which he has spoken to us through his word to the appointment of an architect. It has happened a lot more slowly than we might have liked, but still a lot faster than many people had expected. And as we "*enlarge the place of our tent [and] stretch the tent curtains wide*", God also says to us, "*Do not hold back*".

So what's the vision behind all this? We certainly do not want to extend these premises just for the sake of it, just so that we can say we've done it, just because other churches have done it. We felt very strongly that the church should remain here - in the centre of this city. Although there may be opportunities for planting out other congregations as time goes by, the church has a positive and powerful role to play here, right at the heart of this community. I hope that comes out in at least some of what is

said from the front of church on a Sunday – Wade Street Church should be involved in, or engaged with, the local community. I would love to see the church *at the heart of the city* here in Lichfield. And if we are to take seriously what I believe God is calling us to do, then we will be *at the heart of the city* in several different ways. (Many of you will have read this in a recent edition of *Vision*.)

Geographically – This is why I believe it is important that we retain our site in the centre of the city, wherever else we might consider planting congregations. The position of the church buildings is a real asset, especially given the redevelopment of the Civic Hall site and longer term plans for development (particularly residential) in the city centre. In time, we may well consider setting up satellite congregations or cells around the city and beyond, but I believe our physical presence at the heart of the city is very important.

Demographically – Wade Street Church must attempt to be a church that reflects as much of the community in its own make-up as possible and which seeks to reach out to that community in appropriate ways. Examples of that might be the setting up of a luncheon club to serve our elderly neighbours in the retirement flats around the church, and opening up facilities for city centre workers and shoppers to worship during the week, as well as much improved facilities for young people in a dedicated suite of rooms upstairs.

Theologically/Ethically – I believe the church has a powerful contribution to make to the life of this city by the input of its members into politics, education, local government etc., becoming, if you like, part of the Christian conscience of the community. That will continue to be encouraged through the weekly Sunday teaching, but the more flexible set of rooms and resources that are envisaged in the new buildings will make study groups and other midweek meetings easier to manage than at present.

Ecumenically – Wade Street Church has long been at the heart of *Churches Together* and has helped to ensure that it retains its mission focus. Whatever else might happen after the new buildings are completed, we must resist any temptation to retreat into the security of our own holy huddle.

Culturally – One of the clear strengths of Wade Street Church is that we are becoming increasingly involved in the cultural life of the city and we're often invited to participate in events. New facilities within the church buildings will make it easier to stage concerts and other events (such as we already do during the Lichfield Arts Festival week) and to use such events not only in building bridges with the community, but also in outreach and evangelism. It would also be wonderful to be able to use some of the space as exhibition and display areas for art and craft work produced by talented members of our own congregation.

Socially – The development of the buildings will, I hope, give us more scope to reach out through such things as luncheon clubs (as we have already said) and other community-focussed activity. An office and administrative facilities will mean that there will be a more regular presence on the church site and there will be much greater opportunities for offering information and advice both to those who already have some link with the church and to the wider public. It would also be good to have a more permanent outlet for Traidcraft and similar goods and a base for other appropriate campaigning initiatives.

Evangelistically – A church which is visibly at the heart of the city, and is well-used and outward looking in its activities, will speak far more powerfully to the people of this city than a church which is open for only a few hours each week – and then only for its core members. New facilities, especially if they incorporate up-to-date technology to aid communication, will be invaluable in improving our ability to connect with those who as yet have little or no contact with the Christian church.

My dream for the church is that it would be a place which functions very much at the heart of the city and is alive with activity every day as different people and groups meet on the site. The use of the church would mean that other people were drawn to the community of believers who form the core, and the

number of committed believers would be constantly growing – and those believers would be becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ. There might even need to be more than one service on a Sunday (maybe at different times or in different places) and services on different days of the week ... and the Holy Spirit would be clearly seen to be at work.

In all of this, though, we must never forget that our primary focus is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one from whom we draw our inspiration and whose commands we seek to follow. And without him – without his teaching, his death, his resurrection and the gift of his Holy Spirit, we would be wasting our time and energy. **He** is the one whom we worship. We are **his** disciples. We are in the business of sharing and proclaiming **his** love with the people of this city. As we knuckle down to the task of raising the money needed for this project, as we move forward in detailed planning and building, as we furnish and equip the new buildings, and as we use those buildings to his glory, we must ensure that we never take our eyes off him and never allow ourselves to replace him at the core of our belief and work. That's why we have adopted as our slogan for this project: ***"A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church."***

So what do we need to do? What do **you** need to do? The first thing to do is to get behind the vision. That's why we read those words from the book of *Joshua* this morning. The episode described in chapter 24 comes at a crucial time in the history of God's people. They are on the verge of becoming a new nation, of settling in the land that God has promised them. They've had a long time of preparation as they've wandered through the desert on their way out of Egypt. Now the time has come to realise the vision, to ensure that what God has promised them becomes a reality. But Joshua wants to make sure that everyone is prepared to work together. The rival allegiances – the gods of the past and the gods of other peoples – are to be put aside and they are to commit themselves to the One True God and his ways. There's a choice to be made and the people have to make that choice if they are to enjoy all the good things God has for them.

This development here is a **new thing**. It's something we believe God has called us to do. We are to move forward into God's purposes for us in this new millennium. We cannot look to the things of the past and try to do things as we've done them in the past. It's an exciting new prospect – with lots of unknowns. But the one thing we do know – that God is leading us – is enough of a surety to encourage us to move on. Are you prepared to go with it?

And this development is **something for this church**. Joshua put before his people the choice between what their God was going to do and what the others gods, the *"gods of the Amorites in whose land [they were] living."* The choice before us is whether we move forward in faith with God or whether we try to fit in with what is going on in the world around us. A church at the heart of the city must be involved in what is happening, but must remain distinctive and prophetic in this community. AS G K Chesterton once wrote, *"The newspapers are constantly encouraging us to be more relevant, but we do not need a church that moves with the world: we need a church that moves the world."*

What I love about this story is that Joshua seems to want to dissuade the people from committing themselves. He tells them it's going to be struggle, that they won't be able to keep to it, that it's too big a commitment for them. But the people are convinced that this is the way to go. This project is not going to be easy – we've seen that in some of the frustration we've already experienced. But I believe it's the way God wants us to go. *"As for me and my household,"* we want this to happen. How about you?

It's going to need prayer – lots of it. It's going to need effort – especially when it comes to working together, when it comes to the inconvenience of building work going on, when it comes to finding people to get involved in the various things that we hope will happen here during the week. It's going to need real commitment to Christ, as we've already said. We must not lose sight of our mission here as God's people. Our task as a church is not to be a fundraising organisation – although that will be important in

achieving our goal – but to be a means of outreach into this community for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We ignore that at our peril.

But we cannot get away from the fact that this is going to need funding. That will be a measure of our commitment to this project. Next Sunday will be a Gift Day. In the morning service there will be an opportunity to give towards this. You have a week to think about that, to pray about it, to do whatever you have to do to be able to make some kind of commitment next week. We need to raise around £350,000 for this project – and we can do it. We reckon we need at least £100,000 before we start the first phase. That seems to be a lot of money – but we've got it somewhere.

Next Sunday you can make an offering there and then – cash or cheque (and if you pay tax, Gift Aid it and the church gets an extra 28%). You may want to pledge some money – you won't have it with you next week, but you promise a certain amount in the future. You may want to set up a standing order with your bank to pay money on a regular basis into the fund. Or you may want to offer a loan to the fund: you might feel that your gift to the church is the interest you forgo on one of your investments. Think about it and pray about it so that next week we can demonstrate our commitment to what God is telling us in a practical and positive way. If you want to discuss any of the practicalities of giving, have a word with David Lodge. There are also forms at back of the church (and they can also be printed off the church website) to help you in some of that.

We stand at a key point in the history of this church, just as Joshua and the people of Israel did at Shechem. I believe God has great things in store for us. He may well be testing our faith and commitment, so *“choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve”* – the gods of the past, of comfort, familiarity and tradition; the gods of the world around: or the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us work and give together so that Wade Street Church truly becomes *“a church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.”*