

EPH 1.18-23: SEEING AND BELIEVING

[Chelmsford 13 January 2013]

I. SEEING

For some people glasses are a fashion item.

Alas for me, they are a necessity. Without glasses, I have poor vision.

I first realised there was something wrong with my sight when as a 17 year old boy I found I couldn't read the hymn-board in my school assembly hall. An appointment was made with an optician, and before you could say 'Jack Robinson' I was wearing glasses. Then I could see.

Today we have called Vision Sunday

Through the prism of God's Word I want to help us gain a fresh vision of spiritual realities.

My text is found in the closing verses of Paul's first chapter of his Letter to the Ephesians:

I ... ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit who will make you wise and reveal God to you, so that you will know him. I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know... how every great is his power at work in us who believe (Eph 1.18-19).

'I want you to be able to see', says Paul.

In particular he wanted the Ephesians to see the immensity of God's power – God's power which had been at work in Jesus and which was now on offer to us.

To be precise Paul says, I want you to see **"how VERY GREAT is God's [lit. His] power at work in us who believe"**. Or at least, that is how the GNB translates this verse.

But it is an inadequate translation.

Paul actually said a good deal more than just that God's power is **"very great"**.

- The translators of the REB were a little closer when they wrote: **"I pray that your inward eyes may be enlightened, so that you may know... how VAST are the resources of his power open to us who have faith"**
- The NRSV is more accurate. For in this version we read Paul praying for his readers to see **"the IMMEASUREABLE GREATNESS of his power for us who believe"**
- Similarly the NIV speaks of God's **"INCOMPARABLY GREAT power"**

The greatness of God's power goes beyond anything this world has ever known or will ever know. In the words of Peterson's paraphrase, it is **"endless energy, boundless strength"**.

There is no way in which we can overstate God's amazing power available to you and me.

It would appear that the Christians to whom Paul was writing, did not see how incredibly amazing God's power is for those who believe.

They were blind to the magnitude of God's power.

Instead, they were much more conscious of the power of the opposition which faced them.

For they lived in a city which was dominated by the worship of the goddess Diana – which was deeply associated with the occult and with all kinds of magic practices.

Significantly Paul didn't minimise the power of the demonic. Indeed, later in this letter he wrote: "**We are not fighting against human beings, but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age**" (Eph 6.12).

Paul was quite clear about the difficulties the church faced. He recognised that the church was involved in a spiritual battle where the very existence of the church was at stake.

But that was not the whole picture.

The so-called 'principalities and powers' were not the only players.

For God was there too – and his presence made a world of difference..

The immensity of God's power put the power of the Evil One into the shade.

Paul was concerned that the Ephesians should focus their eyes on God's power, and not just on the power of the opposition. And so he writes: "**I want you to see how very great – how immeasurably great – is his power**".

But let's not just focus on the dim and distant past.

Let's look at the context we Christians find ourselves today.

Last month we had the results of the 2011 census – and it made depressing reading.

The number of people calling themselves Christian in England declined from 35.3 million in 2001 to 31.5 million in 2011: as a percentage this is a decline from 72% to 59%.

Here, of course, we are talking about nominal Christians.

In reality two-thirds of the population have no *actual* connection to any religion or church, despite what they write down on forms. When it comes to active Christians, only 10% of those call themselves Christian actually attend church.

Yes, there are places where the church is growing – not least in inner London.

In spite of the fact that we are a city-centre church with no parking – we continue to hold our own; we are still experiencing growth.

But sadly, there are many places where churches are only holding on by the skin of their teeth.

Within the next few years, unless a miracle occurs, there will be whole-sale closures of places of worship.

What makes things worse for Anglicans, Methodists, and the URC is that their churches tend to have many older people.

In 2005 35% of Anglicans were 65 or over. Or to express the figures differently, the proportion of churchgoers 65 and over is twice the proportion of this age-group in the population at large.

As a result the Church of England synod last July was told that Anglican church attendance is expected to decline by almost 60% by 2030.

Baptists by contract have fewer older people – only 25% of Baptists are over 65 years of age.

Nonetheless, although we are not declining as fast as the other denominations, nonetheless

Baptist attendance in England declined 8% between 1998 and 2005.

If these statistics are not enough to depress you, look at the way in which Christian values are being attacked and mocked in public life.

The House of Commons will soon be voting on gay marriage – and by all reports, an overwhelming number of MPs will vote for this travesty of a concept.

Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the forces of secularism, atheism, materialism and general godlessness, it is easy to become blind to the even greater magnitude of God's power.

For as Peter Brierley, a leading church statistician, has said about the recent census: *“The final arbiter on the life and death of the church is not statistics but a risen Lord Jesus”*

The fact is that we need to **“see how very great – how immeasurably great – is God's power at work in us who believe”**.

Indeed, as Paul says later in this letter, God **“by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of”** (Eph 3.20). Paul is using here what the Greek grammar calls a ‘super-superlative: literally, he says that God is able to do *‘infinitely more’* (A & G) or *‘vastly more than more’* (FFB) than we could ever that we can ever ask for or even think of.

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it: *‘God can do anything – far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it by working within us.’*

This is what we need to see

Instead of seeing the problems we face, we need to see the power is available to us.

II. BELIEVING

But it is not enough just to see, we must also believe – for the fact is that God's power will make no difference at all if we do not believe.

Faith is the catalyst, and without faith, nothing happens.

My question to us is this: do we believe that in 2013 God is going to do more than we could ever imagine, guess or request in our wildest dreams?

Or is 2013 going to be just another year of the same old church thing?

Friends, I have only got another 14 months to go before I have to stand down as your minister.

I don't want to go through the motions of playing at church.

I want our church to make a difference to our city – but if it is going to make a difference, then it will be down to our faith.

As a church we have drawn up a series of vision statements.

- We have said that *‘we exist to go Christ's way and make disciples’* – but without faith translated into action, that will be just words.

- We have said that we want to be a community which is ‘*warm and welcoming, risk-taking and God-trusting, excited and enthusiastic, sacrificing and resourcing, transforming lives and changing culture*’ - - but without faith translated into action, that is as meaningful as a politician’s promise.

The very ***first challenge*** we face is to believe – to believe that in the coming year there is no limit to what God can do here at Central Baptist Church.

OK, last year we lost out to Genesis when we sought to persuade the Council to rule the Chancellor Building should be used for the good of the community – but that was but round one. What about round two? Think of all the opportunities that the new site is going to offer us.

Do we believe that God is going to use us for his purposes?

If so, then how are we going to work with God?

For faith is more than believing – faith is taking action.

God doesn’t work in a vacuum – he works through us.

“See, says Paul, **“how very great is God’s power at work in us who believe”**”

Challenge number two: to believe that as people pass our church in 2013, increasingly, they will not just see a building, but rather a place where there is warmth and love for all!

To believe that Central Baptist Church will become the friendliest place in town?

The fact is that we live in a world where love is in short supply – where relationships are fragile and often break down – where people are lonely and long for friendship.

Do we believe that God can transform our church into a truly welcoming community?

Do we? Then what are you going to do about it?

How are you going to put your faith into action?

We have heard this morning about the Oasis Cafe – but if the Oasis Cafe is to survive, let alone flourish, then we need more volunteers to come on the rota?

And if you are not free to help because you work during the week, then what about coming on the rota for serving coffee after the service – we are desperate for more helpers.

God **“by means of his power working through us is able to do so much more than we can ask or think”**

Challenge number three: to believe that in the coming 12 months Central Baptist Church will be a place where many people will come to know Jesus as their Saviour and Lord!

Do you believe that God could actually work in people’s hearts and lives?

Do you believe that God could work in the lives of your friends – indeed in the lives of your loved ones?

Faith has been defined as ‘possibility thinking’ – what do you think God could possibly do in the lives of those known to you?

Tomorrow we start an Alpha course. Are you willing to put your faith on the line and invite a friend or neighbour along to the introductory supper?

The fact is that without faith in action, nothing is going to happen.

See **“how very great is God’s power at work in us who believe”**

Challenge number four: to believe that in spite of the present squeeze on money, in spite of the fact some people have had no increase in salary for several years and other people have actually more money than ever, God will enable Central Baptist Church will have the financial resources to make the most of the opportunities for mission and ministry that are before us.

At the moment we are spending more than we receive: but do we believe that God is going to unlock the money which is undoubtedly present in people's pockets and bank accounts?

That is the question we are going to face at the church meeting at the end of January.

At the end of the day it will come down to whether or not we are all (the emphasis on all) willing to put our faith in action, and make the mission of our church a financial priority.

The word that God has put on my heart today that as a church we should 'SEE AND BELIEVE'

Do we see **how very great is his power at work in us who believe**" (Eph 1.19)?

Do we believe that that God "**by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of**" (3.20)?