

Jeremiah 29:1-7; Luke 10:1-11

Seeking God's Vision 2: Looking Out

Rev'd Rich, Enville & Kinver, 16th June 2024

This is the second sermon in our series on 'Seeking God's Vision' which leads us up to our Benefice Weekend Away at the Church Hall on the 29th & 30th June. Last week we began the series on Seeking God's Vision by thinking about how we can't Seek God's Vision if we don't first seek God. If you missed last week's sermon then I do encourage you to head over to St Peter's website where you can listen to a recording of it, or to pick up a copy of the text from the back of Church.

Last week we were Looking Up in search of God's Vision, this week we're Looking Out as we Seek God's Vision for our communities, our nation, our world, and I want to begin with a story about a very formative experience which I once had.

A good few years ago now, not long after we were married, Lucie and I went on a mission trip with a charity called Bless to the town of Slavonski Brod in Croatia. Now until we went there Croatia wasn't really a country I'd thought that much about, but I was vaguely aware when I was at school that there was a war going on there because it popped up on Newsround from time to time, but beyond that I didn't know very much at all.

So, in preparation for this week-long visit, we learned a few words of Croatian – *Dobra dan* for hello, *hvala lijepo* for thank you very much, *topola chocolada* for hot chocolate, and tried not to giggle at the crib sheet we'd been sent by the Church we were visiting which informed us that Holy God is translated *sveti bog!*

We also tried to learn a bit more about the town we were going to – Slavonski Brod. By this time it was just over a decade since the war had ended, and the impact was still clearly felt. The town of Brod had once been a much bigger place, spanning both sides of the river Sava, the two halves joined by a single bridge in the centre of the town. However, following the war, the river became the border between Croatia and Bosnia, and many people who lived either side of the bridge never saw relatives and friends again.

We learned about the great needs of the town, both practical as they continued to rebuild from the devastation of the war, but also emotional and spiritual, as the economic impact of the conflict meant that there were still very few jobs and little medical support for the psychological trauma and feelings of guilt and shame that the war left in its wake.

So I was really looking forward to going somewhere where we could make a real difference. Somewhere where they really needed our help and, although we were only going to be there for a few days, the impact, I knew, would be significant.

And then we arrived. And I very quickly realised how wrong I had been. I had gone there with the attitude that we were there to bless the people of Slavonski Brod, to bring them some of the hope, some of the good news, some of the blessing that we had back in England.

But actually I am sure that we came away from that trip far more blessed by them than they were by us. That's not to say we didn't make a difference – I helped paint a Youth Centre and did some work with Pastor Darko, and I preached my first sermon with a translator. But my overwhelming sense when we were there was that this was somewhere where God was already at work. In fact I wrote these words in my journal when we were there:

“We are not here to transform the community nor should we try.
God is working here. They are working here. And now we are here.
And sometimes just to be here is enough”

The big lesson that I learned from that trip is that when we think about Seeking God's Vision together for our communities, our nation, our world, we have to start with the assumption that God is already there, that the Holy Spirit is already working.

And if we start with that assumption then Seeking God's Vision becomes a very different proposition. We don't start by looking for the things that we can do, we start by looking for the things that God is already doing. We look for the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control – where we see those things we know that God is at work.

Sometimes that will be in the lives of Christians, or in the lives of Churches, but quite often I think God works in spite of Christians, in spite of Churches, God works in the people we least expect, and I have to say I don't think that's a bad thing! It takes the pressure off us because it's not about us. Our job is to see what God is doing and join in where we can. But God is not limited by our ability to join in.

God is at work in the world, at work in peoples' lives, by the Holy Spirit, bringing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control, bringing reconciliation, to and through the lives of people and communities in our villages, in our nation, and all over the world.

One of the great traumatic events of the Old Testament was the Babylonian exile of the late 7th Century BC. The people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians, their leaders and skilled workers were carried off as captives by the invading army, and their land was taken from them.

This was an event that caused a community trauma on the scale of the Jewish Holocaust in the second world war, or the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. Its impact resonates throughout the second half of the Old Testament. Nobody was untouched by the Exile, even those who were left behind.

But the Prophet Jeremiah, writing in God's voice to those who were carried off to Babylon, offers some intriguing and unexpected advice. In his letter he says:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

That is not the advice they would have been expecting. They would have felt that in leaving their homeland, the land that God had promised to Abraham, the land that God had led them back to after escaping from Egypt through the Red Sea and following the forty years wandering in the wilderness. They thought that in leaving that land they were leaving God behind. But that's not what happened.

What happened is that they found God there, already at work, urging them to seek the welfare of the city where they had been taken in to exile, to seek the welfare of the people who had taken them captive, and to pray to the Lord on their behalf.

It's an astonishing thing to ask, it turns their understanding of how God works in the world on its head, and it reminds us that there is no place too far, no situation too devastating, no life too lost, that that God cannot be found there.

Seek the welfare of the city, and pray to the Lord on its behalf. Seek the welfare of Enville, of Kinver, pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. That is how we seek God's vision together for our communities, our nation, our world. That is how we look out beyond the walls of our Churches. We look to see what God is already doing.

And that's not always easy. And it brings us back to what we were talking about last week in that to Seek God's Vision we first need to Seek God because the better we know God the better we are able to understand, to recognise, to see what God is up to.

When Jesus sent his followers ahead of him to prepare the towns and villages for his arrival, as we heard in our Gospel reading from Luke 10, he told them to seek out 'people of peace', places where the Spirit was at work. And a big part of their task was to discern who those people were, where those places were, so that they could prepare the way for Jesus's arrival. And in some ways that is our task too. As we look and see where God is already at work, then we can help prepare the way for Jesus in those places, in those people.

I'll always remember an elderly lady called Tilly in one of my old Churches. She was a wonderful woman with a spectacular Welsh accent, who lived just across the road from the Church. She'd been to Sunday School as a child, but had never really connected with Church as an adult. Despite all that she exemplified the fruits of the Spirit in so many ways, and God was clearly at work in her.

I can't quite remember how we got chatting, probably at some village event or at the local Inn one Sunday lunchtime, but after our conversation she turned up at Church one Sunday and from that day on she hardly missed a service until she died a couple of years ago, and I had the privilege of going back to take her funeral. She was one of those 'people of peace' that Jesus told his followers to look out for, someone who was ready to receive Jesus and all it took was an invitation, a welcome.

As we continue to Seek God's Vision together for our lives, our Churches, our communities, our nation, and our world, we must be on the lookout for what God is already doing, the people in whose lives God is already working, the places where we can say, as Jesus did in that Gospel reading, The Kingdom of God has come near.

And then, as Churches, as a Benefice, we can think about how we join in with that work, who we might partner with, what organisations we might support, how we can learn from our sisters and brothers across the world, how they might help us to see anew what God is doing in our own lives and Churches and communities.

Because God is at work in this world, in myriad different ways, through myriad different people. And if we can look at the world with an expectation that we will see God at work then we will see God at work, and we will be astonished, astounded, amazed, by what we see.

Amen.