

Dear Friends,

Like Sam in last week's Pastoral Letter, I've spent a lot of time thinking about, and reflecting on, the last Circuit Meeting. Due to Covid, this was the first "in-person" Circuit Meeting I've ever attended. Though, to be honest, it was pretty similar to meetings of every denomination I've been a part of, on both sides of the ocean.

Like most of those denominations, my own United Reformed Church included, there is a lot of anxiety in the post-Covid church. We've been talking for decades about declining membership and finances, but Covid has accelerated the process. While I don't believe the meeting was dominated by those fears, there was definitely some concern regarding the future.

I wouldn't usually use this kind of letter to promote one of my own sermons, but the message at Godalming United this last week was (coincidentally) very appropriate for this meeting. In the sermon, I talked about my favourite Bible Story, which is in Jeremiah 32.

In this story, Jerusalem is on the verge of being conquered by the invading Babylonians. The prophet Jeremiah, who had spoken out against the king of Israel, was being held prisoner for his criticism. While in jail, he has a vision that his cousin is going to come and ask him to buy a piece of land...a vision which soon comes true.

The problem is that this land is, literally, unattainable. It's already behind enemy lines. Babylon already owns it. Jeremiah would be paying for a piece of paper that he could never enforce. Yet he goes ahead and buys the land anyway...because he believes that someday, at some point in the future, that Israel would again inherit the land. That someday he would see the benefits of the investment he was making during a time of hopelessness.

I told Godalming United...I'll tell this circuit...I'll tell my own denomination and any other church around the world that will listen **I believe that The Church still has a future.** Now, I'm not going to pretend that I know what that future is, or what it will look like. Will we ever regain the cultural predominance that we held in the past? I kind of doubt it. But I still believe that God is at work in our churches and that God has a plan for them.

Like all clergy, I believe it so much I'm willing to stake my future on it. There are dark moments when I look at the decline and wonder if I'll have a job in ten or twenty years. I then look at my 14-year-old daughter who, despite my best efforts, continues to declare that she feels called into ministry. I wonder what her career prospects can possibly look like after 40 more years of decline, but, then I remember Jeremiah, I remember his vision, and his words. "For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."

We don't know the plan for the church, but we know, and trust in, the One who does.

In hope,

Revd Adam Payne