

Dear Friends,

I wonder what you have learnt from the Pandemic. There are some people who are much poorer financially than they were pre-pandemic, whereas the richest people in the world are now even richer. A similar trend was seen in the Great Depression and the Second World War. As we emerge into the light of the new normal, I wonder if parallel trends can be seen in churches. Will some congregations quickly flourish better than ever, and will the decline or demise of some churches be hastened? One amazing new feature of UK church life is the rapid recent growth of Chinese churches, which is being closely studied by the Bible Society.

One cynic said that in the pandemic he learned that according to the media, there are so many 'leading experts' that he wonders whether there are any scientists left who are not 'leading'! One statement I have heard repeated around the circuit is 'We can't carry on as we are'. I am never sure what people mean when they say this and suspect that there may not yet be a consensus about the alternative. However, it is clearly the case that we need to discern a unifying vision in order to move the circuit forward in the (hopefully) post-pandemic world. For this reason, the CLT, together with some church stewards, are to gather for a Vision Day, facilitated by the Learning Network. I suspect that this will be the beginning of a process and not the endpoint.

I have become increasingly aware that whilst in business a vision or a mission is the product of hard thinking, analysis and consultation with marketing and PR advisors etc, in Biblical terms a vision is a revelation given by God, sometimes unasked for and sometimes the result of great spiritual striving. Our mission is the Mission of God which He invites us to participate in. Take the case of Jacob. In 1742 a hymn comprised of 14 6-line verses was published. It was written by Charles Wesley and came to be known as Wrestling Jacob. It is of course inspired by the story found in Genesis 32:24-32. Here is the first verse which may be familiar to you:

*Come O thou traveller unknown,  
Whom still I hold but cannot see!  
My company before is gone,  
And I am left alone with thee,  
With thee all night I mean to stay  
And wrestle till the break of day.*

Such was the intensity of Jacob's spiritual struggle that ever after he walked with a limp! Is part of the lesson of this strange story that revelation, or vision, does not always come easily. There is a cost involved.

Jesus Himself spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert in preparation for his public ministry culminating in his redemptive sacrifice, as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He began His ministry with a clear mission statement - *to seek and save the lost*. As we approach Lent, I hope that as a circuit we will make it a time to wrestle with big questions about what God is calling us to do post-pandemic and how does God want us to do it. As individuals, as local churches and as a circuit community, I pray that in the period leading to Easter we may be granted the revelation or vision of what our calling truly is. I believe that when God calls us to a task, He will grant us the means to fulfil it. Our responsibility is our response to His ability. If we have learnt that lesson, then the pandemic years have not been wasted.

God bless you,

Keith

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