



# 2020 VISION

## MISSION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

**GLOBAL CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE 2011**

### **Opening Talk**

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They say that nostalgia isn't what it used to be, but I'd like to take you back 23 years to when Sue and I first arrived in Yaoundé the capital of Cameroun in 1988. On the connecting flight from Douala, we had met with five or six other who were heading to the same Orientation course that we were making for. Bleary eyed from the overnight flight and the early-morning chaos that was Douala, we stumbled out into the bright sunshine of the airport car park to meet the person who was due to pick us up. Of course, there was no one there. Naturally enough, this being Africa, there was no shortage of people offering to help us and within minutes there was a large crowd gathered round, shouting at us, offering to carry our bags, to take us to taxis and so on. We were just confused, we shouted back, and then we naturally gathered into a circle, around our bags and looked at each other – dazed and confused. Eventually, our lift came and we were whisked off to the centre where our course was being held – and a perfect morning came to a perfect end when there was no breakfast for us!

I've often reflected on that group of nervous young people, who had ostensibly travelled to Africa to help the continent, but who when faced by the loudness, colour and vivacity of the place, formed a circle, looked after their belongings, their backs turned to the people they had come to serve. If we were going to be any good to Africa whatsoever, we had to get beyond our initial huddling together in a safe group.

There are echoes of my experience in the passage we have chosen for this reflection – Jeremiah 29. Let me read you a few verses.

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: “Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Try and put yourself in the shoes of one of the people of Judah in exile in Babylon. You, your family and friends have all been carted off to a foreign country. They don't speak your

language and the food is strange. What's worse, it seems as though God has either abandoned you or he isn't quite as powerful as you had been led to believe. The whole story of Israel being God's special people and God being the God of the whole world seems to have come crashing down.

Thankfully there were always the prophets who spoke up and encouraged the people that soon they would be returning to Jerusalem, that God and his people would triumph and everything would be right with the world.

Then there was Jeremiah! Jeremiah wasn't subtle – he called all of the other prophets and promised that they would be executed for their falsehood. The message he gave was also very different from the instant triumphalism of the false prophets. We don't have a lot of time, but I'd like to highlight two key themes in Jeremiah's message to the exiles.

### **God and His People**

There is something very important in the few verses that I highlighted. God describes himself as 'The God of Israel'. Despite everything, he continues to identify himself with his people. They might be in exile, everything might have changed, but God is still the God of Israel. That key, defining relationship has not changed. They may be in exile, but it is God who has exiled them, it isn't the might of Babylon that achieved it. And then stepping down to one of the most quoted passages in Scripture: verses 11-14 where God says he has good plans for Israel, plans to bless them, to listen to their prayers and to bring them back from exile.

### **The People and Exile**

The problem is that when people quote the passage about God having good plans for his people, they often miss out the bit about 70 years of exile! Seventy was longer than the life expectancy of the people in those days. It was God who had taken his people into exile and though he would take them home, it wasn't about to happen anytime soon. The message was a simple one – all of you are going to die here, your children and grandchildren will return to Jerusalem, but not you. So, settle down, do your best to thrive in this country and pray for peace and prosperity!

The overall message is very simple. God cares for Israel, he identifies himself as their God, but they are going to have to get used to a whole new way of living.

### **Are We in Exile?**

There is something in this passage which resonates with us, we have a sense that things have changed in the UK; that the church is going into exile.

This is Christ Church in Sunderland. It stands in a prominent place on one of the major roads into the city. When I was a lad, my mate Peter's dad was vicar here. Though I attended the local Methodist Sunday school, I would often join the choir at Christ Church for weddings and other events as a lucrative way of supplementing my pocket money. Christ Church was very much a centre of the community. Today it is the Sunderland Sikh Centre.

No doubt many of you have similar stories. Peter Brierly and others have done an excellent job of describing the change in the landscape of Church attendance in the UK over the past decades. The statistics tell a clear story – there are significantly less believers in the UK than there once was. But I don't want to focus on numbers.

When we all grew up a bit, we would sometimes go to the local pub with Peter's dad – it was a bit embarrassing for us long haired student types to sit in a pub with the an elderly gent in a dog collar. But there was a good side to it; we never had to buy a drink. Somebody at the bar would always send a round over for the vicar and his friends. Hard working, working class Sunderland fans had a respect for the vicar and wouldn't let him or his young friends pay for their own pints.

I wonder if the same would still happen today? Not only have the numbers in Church declined, so has the position of Christians in society. Leaving aside the scare stories in some of the press about the persecution of Christians, it is clear that we are no longer viewed as the good guys. In a 2007 survey by YouGov 42% of people responded that religion is harmful. The "fact" that wars are caused by religion is pretty much part of our accepted narrative today.

The routine, almost casual way in which Christians are dismissed as stupid in the newspaper blogs or become the butt of jokes on Radio Four shows that we are in a very changed landscape.

This change is rather puzzling for us as a Church. Over the last three or four centuries, God has been amazingly gracious to the people of these islands. We have seen a thriving Church and the UK has played (and still does) a key role in many cross-cultural mission movements. The problem is that we sort of assumed that this blessing from God said something about us, rather than something about him. We assumed it gave the Church in the UK a special place in our country and in the world.

We rarely stopped to question how normal this situation was. Do you know that there are only two countries in the world where clerics have a position in the upper house of Parliament by right? The UK and Iran!

When the early Christians declared that Jesus Christ was Lord, they put themselves on a collision course with the Roman Empire and its Lord, Caesar. Somewhere along the line, the Church ceased to challenge the establishment and even convinced itself that it was part of the machinery of government and commerce.

The recent furore over St Paul's Cathedral is an example of this. The Cathedral is intimately entwined in the life and government of the City of London. Its ability to bear witness to Jesus and to comment on the issues which were raised by the protestors is compromised by its position. This has led to a somewhat confused and contradictory response from the Cathedral, when a radical, counter-cultural voice was called for.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticizing St Pauls – well, not much. This is just a contemporary example of how we've allowed our witness and mission to be compromised by assuming that we were at home, when really we were in exile!

But the reality is, that as Christians, we haven't gone into exile – we've always been there. The Church is permanently in exile and will be until the Lord returns. The thing is, we have allowed the success of the Church in the West and the way in which Christianity has been

integrated into and subjugated by our culture and politics to colour the way we see things. We became so used to phrases like 'Britain is a Christian country' or 'a missionary sending country' that we began to believe that these were the natural state of things. We thought we were in Jerusalem, when all the time we were in Babylon!

For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come. (Heb 13:14)

Things have changed for the Church in the UK - but they are getting back to normal! Unlike the Jews, who were just going into exile, we have always been there – we just didn't always realise it.

### **Mission Out of Exile**

The changes that the Church has gone through and the realisation, or rediscovery, that we are living in exile inevitably has an impact on our approach to cross-cultural mission. I'd like to take us back to the two initial thoughts that I drew from the passage in Jeremiah.

### **Ourselves and God**

When the Jews went into exile, they lost all of the trappings of their religion and former power. The temple, the sacrificial system and all of those props were lost. The only thing they had to hold on to was the fact that God called them his people.

I believe that the same thing is happening to the Church in the UK. We are losing the power and influence that we once had. The tacit alliance between the Church and the state which once supported missionary activity has by and large been dismantled – and – you know what - the Kingdom of God has not suffered in the slightest.

One of the most important advances in missionary thought and practice over the last few years has been the recapturing of the concept of the Mission of God. Mission is God's work and he will ensure its success. We had convinced ourselves that mission was our responsibility, that God somehow could not reach the nations without our help. I don't know how many missionary talks I've heard which ended in the guilt trip of 'God needs you'. What sort of pathetic God needs a bloke like me.

Thankfully, as the things which propped up our self-reliance are being knocked away, we are regaining a sense that mission is God's work and that he calls us to join him. He doesn't sit helplessly on the sidelines waiting for us to get on with it.

### **Ourselves and Exile**

The Jews longed to go back home and the false prophets made them think that everything was ok – but Jeremiah came along and shattered this illusion. They were in for a lifetime of exile.

The Jews sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion.

I have an impression that we do something similar, we like hark back to a golden age, when Spurgeon was packing in the crowds at the Met Tab, Lloyd-Jones was expounding Romans in minute detail at Westminster Chapel, Hudson-Taylor was recruiting huge numbers of missionaries for China and everything in the garden was rosy. Of course, that time never

existed, except through our rose tinted spectacles. However, while we might look back to a mythical, wonderful past, we are less sure about the future.

The Danish physicist Neils Bohr said that it is difficult to make predictions, especially when it concerns the future. I reckon this is very true about the situation of the church in the UK today. There is one school of thought that says we are living through a paradigm shift which will see an almost terminal decline in the church in Europe and a reawakening at the periphery. Others believe that things have more or less stabilised as they are. Our Grandchildren will be able to tell us how it all worked out.

I don't know what the future holds, but one thing I am sure of is that it won't be the past! We can't go back! Things are not like they used to be and they never will be again. Britain will never be the great missionary sending country that it was in the past – it may, in God's mercy, be a different sort of great missionary sending country, but the social and political factors, not to mention the religious ones, that allowed for the great mission movements of the 19th and 20th centuries have ended. We need to look to a new sort of future and not try and reclaim the past.

### **New Structures**

The way in which the world is changing provides new opportunities and new possible structures for mission. We are already seeing new initiatives springing up from individuals and Churches. Andrew Jones, the Tall Skinny Kiwi of internet fame is at the vanguard of new models of social entrepreneurship that are taking the Gospel into far flung parts of the globe. Many Churches have their own outreach or church plants in different parts of the world, often cutting out the traditional mission agencies altogether.

### **New Relationships**

Another reason I believe that the future is bright for mission is the way in which the world church has changed. The paradigm when the missionary was an emissary from a Christian country to a pagan world has more or less vanished with the growth of the Church. Modern missionaries are part of international, multi-cultural teams rather than lonely neo-colonialists. At the 1910 Edinburgh conference, VS Azariah famously said:

“Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for love. Give us friends.”

In 1910, we may not have been ready for such a radical call, today, you have to be a friend – and this is a far better place to be than an expert six-feet above contradiction.

### **New Roles**

More than ever, mission work has a capacity to bless the British Church. I'm not referring to the idea of the UK receiving missionaries – though praise God, we do. No, I believe that missionaries have a role in conveying what God is doing in the world Church back to their congregations and supporters in the UK. Missionaries are a conduit for blessing and encouragement – and there is a lot to be encouraged about.

I also believe that mission agencies have a key role in keeping the wider mission of God to the world in front of the British Church. A recent report on the church by the Evangelical Alliance purported to be a snapshot of the Evangelical church in the UK and there was not a single mention of world mission in there. If the church does not have a mission vision, it will miss out!

### **New Responsibilities**

Even when there is an interest in mission, it is often very restricted. Whenever a Church leader tells me that their church has their own missionary outreach, I innocently ask them if that is to Kenya or Tanzania – if they say neither, I suggest it must be Uganda or Malawi. I'm almost always right. It's great to see what Churches are doing, but we need to remind them of the needs in Central African Republic, Kazakhstan and Indonesia.

In closing, I'd like to take you back to that circle of nervous foreigners standing in a circle, protecting their bags, in the car park in Yaoundé airport. By God's grace, each of those people eventually made the adaption to life in Africa and went on to make a significant contribution to the work of Bible translation and literacy. Sue and I literally built a house, planted a garden and had children.

I believe that churches and mission agencies in the UK face similar challenges today. As we find ourselves in a changing world, facing new challenges and unfamiliar territory, will we gather round in a circle protecting our structures, our traditions and our ways of working – or will we settle in this strange new world, build houses and find ourselves doing extraordinary things for God?