

MAKING PLANS AMIDST UNCERTAINTY

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:1-24

The apostle Paul was not the kind of man to use cunning and to manipulate people. He was not a superficial person who just wanted to please everyone and tell them what they wanted to hear. He was sincere, imitating the Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to tell the truth, and be honest. This is what is to be expected of a Christian. He had planned to come to Corinth again but the response of the church to the things he had previously written to them meant that this had to be put on hold. Events, including how people will respond to things we do and say, mean that there are always things that are unforeseen and unforeseeable, even for an apostle. This had led people in the church in Corinth to criticise Paul unjustly for not being sincere.

Our situation as we go into autumn is not identical to Paul's but there are some similarities. We are facing ongoing uncertainty as we seek to make plans, with the future full of unforeseeable events. If we cast our mind back a year, did we foresee the months that lay ahead of us? Did we know how many people we would lose as a fellowship for different reasons? Did we know that the autumn would be full of complications with the 'tier system' that was introduced last October? Did we know that we would face a November lockdown with the instruction given to churches to close again? Did we know that in the New Year, the nation would have a further three month lockdown imposed on it? We rightly make plans but there are lots of events that we cannot foresee that might mean we have to change those plans.

1. COVID has not gone away.

We might wish we could stop having to think about and talk about COVID but it has not gone away, nor will it in the months that lie ahead. It may be downgraded from 'pandemic' to 'endemic' status. But it is still with us. It is hard to know where the nation will be in six months time, let alone a year. The famine that impacted the world we have reported in the Book of Acts, led to actions being taken by the churches, such as special collections, special journeys to Jerusalem. Will there be a 'new variant' that affects us? Will the booster jabs be a great success? Will there be more lockdowns? Has the Government learnt to show more humility in how it addresses the church?

Certainly, we might expect to see more evidence before we are instructed not to sing, or even to close again. But it still leaves us wondering about Fellowship Meals, Wednesday

Morning Fellowship, Door-to-Door work to some extent, and what our reputation with outsiders might look like if consensus among the public as to what is 'model behaviour' fractures more in the event of the ongoing suspension or renewed loss of liberties. There is a lot that is hugely uncertain.

2. We are not the same.

It still remains to be seen in wider society what longer-lasting changes have been made in how people think and how they behave, including how they behave towards each other. People talk about the way they go about things never being the same again.

We might have learnt through the period to be more grateful for some of the things we took for granted but which lockdowns, masks and social distancing removed from us. We might actually, if we are honest with ourselves, have preferred the loss of social contact, given the stresses and strains that being with other people puts on us.

Whatever our experience and our hopes for the future, we all have had to learn to live with uncertainty. How well we have adjusted to this may have varied. But it has called for us to develop resilience, fortitude, and adaptability, among other things. We have had to learn to manage our hopes, fears and expectations, and seek to bring all our thoughts subject to Christ. How successful have we been in doing this? Have we been able to develop resilience ourselves?

In the light of where we are, we cannot promise ourselves that things are going to quickly change and become more stable. We may have to learn to live with greater measures of uncertainty, compared to what we were used to before. What is vital is that we continue to grow in personal holiness. The deeper thoughts, attitudes and judgments we make need to be ever more sanctified. People are demonstrating these things in other places. They are not the same. But are we?

As a church, we have to plan around who we are – not who we once were, or wished we were now.

3. We need to make plans.

Yet we still need to make plans.

Our Lord worked to plans. He told His disciples that they would go to the other side of the lake. On the way they met with a storm which the disciples feared would drown them all. When they arrived at their destination they met with the Gadarene demoniac whose deliverance led to the people begging them to leave so that they quickly returned back to the other side of the lake. Yet all this was known to the Lord. So too are our movements

and what unexpected challenges or opportunities we will encounter. The Lord led the people in the wilderness by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. The plan was never announced in advance, Yet the people also had to get used to erecting the tabernacle and making ready for a long stop. We should look to do the rights things with the light we have, forever long or short a time these plans might or might not apply.

Certainly there are plenty of things to be getting on with. Our aim to be an independent Charitable Incorporated Organisation will take time and attention. There is still a lot of work to be accomplished on the building, as well as other church properties. We have the commencement of Seekers Club ahead of us and then there is our personal witness in our communities, and to our families and friends.

A very urgent need is the need to pray. We have only been mentioning the uncertainties that we are facing as a church. But there are wider pressures. The world is groaning. The situation in Afghanistan is a matter of grave concern. Our intellectual and moral life in the West is foundering on such issues as transgenderism. Pro-life people are subject to obstacles and difficulties. Extreme weather events are part of the 'new normal'. This is the world our young people are growing up in.

We need to be credible and vibrant churches. Whatever uncertainties are around us and about us, this is what we should be planning to be.