

Service Transcript 21st August 2022

Welcome Notices, Birthday Box

Intro Words

Gracious God, we are your church.

May your church be filled with your vision, and clear in our message.

May your church be a light in the darkness, and show love in hard places.

May your church be bold in mission, and motivated by change.

Gracious God, we are your church.

May we be all these things and more. Amen.

Prayer

895 Lord I come to You

443 Open our eyes, Lord (x2)

EXPECTATIONS

Expectations – we all have them. If we go to a restaurant, we expect a certain quality of food or standard of service. When we order stuff online, we expect that the parcel will turn up on the specified day and not thrown into our front garden!

A LEVEL STUDENTS

Last week was a big week for many young people as their A Level results. There were many expectations, from the students themselves, their schools and the Universities they applied for. There were many expectations fulfilled and many dashed.

ARRIVALS BOARD

The of course there are transport timetables. We often think train timetables seem like a work of fiction, but apparently British Airports have the worst record in Europe for late and delayed flights. So we can often get boards that look like this. Is that really the airport's fault that the flight from New York is hours late, or is the problem that our expectations were too high and we need to lower them.

EXPECTATIONS & REALITY

In truth, there may be a massive gulf between expectation and reality – sometimes expectations are exceeded, sometimes dashed. Was that because we were unrealistic, or because it's someone else's fault? The issue of expectations and faith is important in this context. What our our expectations of God in matters of faith? For that matter what our our expectations of ourselves or of the church? Take a look at this verse for example:

ROMANS 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Familiar words. The gospel, the good news is a powerful message; it is the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe. It's a powerful, life-changing message. Yes? Agreed? So why then do only 5% or so of the population follow Christ if it's such a powerful message? That quandary is not a new one. It challenged a Scottish evangelist called Henry Drummond about 150 years ago and he said this:

WILLIAM DRUMMOND QUOTE

If people .. are not influenced or impressed under preaching, the only alternatives are, either that the gospel in substance is not the power of God to salvation, or that the gospel .. is not presented to them so as to reach them.

The language may be a little dated but you get the idea. It's clear. If people aren't coming to Christ, is our expectation of the power of the gospel wrong, or is our expectation of how we are trying to communicate it wrong? Drummond put it this way?

DRUMMOND 2

Either the Gospel cannot save them, or the Gospel does not reach them.

Assuming that we believe that Paul and by implication God is not wrong then we are the problem. We'll look at this a little further in a few moments.

TITLE

1385 Jesus, hope of the nations

Int. Prayers

East African Drought Crisis

- Pray that it will rain!
- Pray that Governments will provide emergency support for these countries. Pray too for long term investment.
- Pray that God's power will be revealed through the church across East Africa – that it will bring a message of hope amid the suffering.
- Pray that the most vulnerable people will be targeted for help first.

Prayer for MRBC – on Weekly Sheet

Reading Acts 12 (on VIDEO)

12 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

15 “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

In our next song, “And can it be” we sing of how God helps us escape from the power of sin and death using the picture of being freed from a prison – which harks back to the incident we just read about.

29 And can it be?

Sermon

RHODA AND THE DISCIPLES

What a surprise! In the all-night prayer meeting, Rhoda goes down to answer the door and when she discovers it’s Peter, she’s so shocked that she goes to tell the disciples without opening the door. She wasn’t expecting Peter, neither were the disciples. In fact, they thought it was his “angel”. Some suggest that they thought Peter had been killed and this was some spiritual apparition, although I tend to go with the other meaning of the Greek *angelos* which is a generic term for messenger. So their thought was that he’d managed to get a message out of jail and someone was delivering it – they just weren’t expecting *him* in the flesh.

But just a minute, what were they actually praying for in their all-night prayer meeting?

PETER

Of course it was Peter in the flesh who called that night and we heard of his miraculous escape. But he was surprised too by being busted out of jail by the angel. I get the impression that until he got into the street, that he thought he was dreaming!

Why the surprise? This was the same Peter who walked on water with Jesus. He was the same man who saw the risen Christ. He was the same Peter who with John saw a lame man healed by their ministry in the Temple. He was the same Peter who saw thousands come to Christ when he preached. He was the same Peter who had heard the words of Jesus. So why did he seem

resigned to jail and possible death? Had he stopped trusting? Was he going through a crisis of faith, or did he believe because James had been killed that it was now his time too?

We don't know only that his expectation of what God was going to do didn't match with the remarkable escape from prison.

VERSE ROMANS 1:16

Which comes back to this verse and William Drummond. If we believe that the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation, then why do we often have really low expectations of God? Is God REALLY mighty to save?

DRUMMOND QUOTE

When people don't come to Christ as a result of our mission and ministry, are we suggesting that Paul is wrong and the Gospel isn't the power of God to the salvation of others? I hope we aren't that stupid. If anyone is then – oh dear! Then we are drawn to the alternative: that we should be considering whether what we do and say is effective and relevant to those who do not know Christ. I have no reason to doubt the power of God to save, but I have every reason to doubt our ability to communicate it relevantly and with expectation that God will move in the lives of the those we are trying to minister to.

In fact, one thing Churches almost never do is think of how their mission activity actually impacts the people it's aimed at. Does it scratch where people itch? Does it minister to their felt and real needs? Does it connect with their spirits? Do churches ever do any kind of reflective or forensic audit of their mission activity? Few in my experience. Churches pray a lot but plan and assess impact rarely. Visions and intentions are broad, never detailed. Did we ever ask God for detailed stuff? If we can't recognise our successes and failures and learn from them (rather than give the old "it was not God's will, or God moves in mysterious ways") then it isn't surprising that we see few come to Christ. I'll remind you of English poet ALEXANDER POPE who once said: *"Blessed in he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."* So true!

And when few come to Christ, our expectancy drags at rock bottom as we rely on fatalism rather than hope or listening to God. We can sing about Jesus being "Hope of the nations" but what hope for Felixstowe?

For the rest of this morning I want us to reflect on our expectations should be as we seek to reach out to others in our community (or our frontlines as we have been talking about in recent weeks) and next time we shall think of the subject of the relevancy of how we present that Good News to others. What I'm saying is designed to challenge us to reflect and ask God to shine a light on our motives and aspirations and attitudes. It isn't a definitive and all-embracing theology of expectation. It's an opportunity to reflect so that we may end up being able to understand our expectations of where we're going, whether that is by adopting good practice and honest reflection, and where we should be expecting and praying for the power of the Holy Spirit in unexpected ways and places.

I believe that God is issuing a challenge to use our common sense and gifts but also look at how we should be stretching our faith. There's nothing mysterious about Spirit-filled ministry when our expectations and reality are in line with each other.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

But even though we know and understand the promises and great truths of Scripture, we somehow suffer falls in expectation. How does that happen? We get some clues from the 12th chapter of Acts.:

WHY DID THE DISCIPLES HAVE LOW EXPECTATIONS OF GOD?

It's a comfort to know that the failure of expectations was felt by the most "senior" of disciples including Peter. We **all** succumb to this phenomenon, even the most secure – so no smugness here. I'm as challenged by this as you are for reasons I will come to. So why this failure? And it was a failure.

- **the shock of losing James** – this was the first of the core of the disciples to be martyred. Others had been martyred, but here was one of the "special three" – Peter, James and John - losing his life. It was a collective shock for the church. Yes there had been persecution and martyrdom, but James? What was going to happen next?

- **collective memory loss** – in their pain and possible panic, they weren't thinking back. This generation knew Jesus, had experienced God's power, heard the words of Jesus first-hand. Had they forgotten? Often when disaster befalls the church (or for that matter any society) – it takes ages to recover from the shock of the unexpected. Take the Covid pandemic, with Brexit and the Ukraine War thrown in – surely a case in point. In a sinful, fallen world with silly politicians and evil men, expect this kind of stuff. The peace and stability of recent years has gone. But God is the same even if people and society have changed. Get back to basics. Affirm God's word and all His promises. Call out again to be filled with His Spirit. Let Him jog our memories, get a faith lift!

- **not really listening to God** – what were the disciples praying for in that prayer meeting? Here were men and women who understood and experienced the power and presence of God in ways we scarcely have ever done. They should have perceived and understood what God was doing. Yet they didn't have a clue. God was gracious in how he treated them. It had its humour. Humour is a gift of God I believe. Peter's release from prison was a wake-up call. I believe God is giving this church and the church in this country a wake-up call. Wake up to what He has to say!

- **mistaking what Jesus had actually said** – why *did* Peter just seem resigned to jail and to certain death? Was he asleep because he wasn't bothered or because he was fatalistic. His surprise at being released gives you a clue. In the same position Paul and Silas sang God's praises, expecting the inevitable miracle which was duly delivered. Was Peter wrongly expecting his end? Jesus had suggested that would be martyred when he was old – but old was a lot younger than these days. Actually we know that Jesus did mean "old" old. Had he misunderstood? We don't know for sure.

Another piece of speculation could be that, *knowing* his end was a long way off, that he was going to have another one of his spectacular defences of the Gospel before Herod. If that was the case, he was second guessing God on that one. Herod's days were already numbered if you care to read Acts 13. Again we don't know for sure.

All I do know is that I have seen so many people's faith dashed because they misunderstood God's will (mistook their own thoughts and feelings for God's will) or just had bad interpretation of God's word (there's a lot of that around). I know so many whose faith has been dashed because God "took" a loved one unexpectedly. Is that so, or have they been taught bad Calvinist theology that changes a loving God into a heartless meanie who just kills our loved ones whenever He wants without thought to us? That's a great dasher of our expectations of a loving God and not so. God weeps with us and desires to comfort us when we lose loved ones.

In truth, they died because death is a consequence of the sin of the world, of mine, and yours. We are a fallen race and we all die and we have no idea of when. All we know is that none of us have a right to a retirement, so it's a blessing when we get one! The God of love sent His Son that we may see death as part of an ongoing existence and Jesus died so that we may have that assurance of an everlasting life in His presence as part of His family. That should be our true expectation as people of God and that's what gives us joy and hope and it's empowering and encouraging when those we love who are in Christ die. And knowing the uncertainty of life and death, that should spur us to redouble our desire to take as many as possible, including our loved ones, with us into God's kingdom, both present or eternal. We'll look at how we communicate that to them next time.

So don't feel too ashamed if you have low expectations, it even happened to Peter! God isn't using Acts 12 to hit us with a big stick about it – just to understand that He wants to give us the highest expectation of Himself: so let's let Him do that.

WILLIAM CAREY, one of the fathers of modern baptists had this famous saying "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

WHAT DO WE EXPECT? After all that, I end with this challenge. What are we expecting of God right now at this time when the pandemic has changed so much – or perhaps just rushed us to where we would inevitably find ourselves. There is so much opportunity and hope for the future here in Felixstowe. Is that for us? Are we expectant of God? Then we attempt great things for Him.

A TESTIMONY I found this a challenge because it has been a wake-up call for me, not just because I'm heading for a major life change, but because I knew all this stuff already. Take a look at this picture. This is me baptising someone at Woodberry Down BC in London about 22 years ago. At a previous baptism service my Senior Pastor Peter, was doing the baptising and I was preaching that day. He said to me "we always preach the gospel on baptism days. So don't forget to make the call for people to come forward if they want to accept Christ." But I said unconfidently "what if no-one comes forward." He replied "if you are preaching the gospel and not expecting someone to get saved, then what are you doing it for?" We then prayed that God would give me confidence in preaching and that someone would accept Christ that day. So I preached with confidence and expectancy and made the appeal and do you know what? No-one came forward.

Deflated, I went early for coffee. As I got my coffee the ladies serving said that I might want to speak to the lady who was sitting by herself at a table crying. She was the only one in the room. I walked over and asked "can I help". She said "I really need to accept Christ but I just don't know how to." I replied "I think I may be able to help." I think she was amongst those baptised a few months later in that picture. God sometimes does match our expectations when we understand and follow His will – and He has a sense of humour!

Let's come before Him asking that we may match our expectations of Him with the reality of His will.

Prayer

- Prayer of confession regarding times when our expectations fell short of what they should have been. For times when our expectations were unrealistic. For times when we did not seek His will

as we should have. For times when we didn't listen to His voice. Recognise this happens to us all, however mature we think we are in the faith.

- prayer that God will guide us by His Spirit to have expectations in line with His will and purposes

- time of silent reflection allowing God to speak to us.

356 Shine Jesus, shine

Ephesians Blessing

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

EPHESIANS 3:30-21

For Reflection & Discussion

Read Acts 12

1. What do you think were the expectations of Rhoda, the disciples and Peter? Think of times when your expectations of what God can do or might do have fallen well short of reality? What shaped your low expectations? How do dramatic changes in our lives influence our expectations, particularly big events like the pandemic *etc.*
2. Can you think of times when your expectations of what you thought God was going to do or should have done were different from what happened? The sort of thing I have in mind may be in terms of bereavement, health and healing, prayer for important things. How did you respond to the outcome? Were your expectations a consequence of what you now know to be misconceptions of what you thought God can or was willing to do?
3. What measures can we take both as individuals and as a church to ensure that our expectations are in accordance with God's purposes for us?