

**“AFTER THE ‘BUT ...’”**  
***Acts 8:9-25; Ephesians 2:1-10***

As Rick reminded us last week, before Christmas we spent some time looking at the first three chapters in *Revelation* in which we read the letters from Jesus Christ to seven of the early Christian churches in Asia Minor – the “easy bit”, as Rick called it. Well, maybe it’s a bit easier to understand than the rest of John’s book about his amazing visions of the final battles between good and evil, but it’s jolly difficult to put into practice if we’re serious about it. There was certainly quite a bit of response to the series and it seems that people were really thinking hard about it. One of the things we noticed as we went through those letters was that, although Jesus begins most of them with words of encouragement and praise, there comes a point where he says “*But ...*” (or “*Nevertheless ...*” or “*Yet ...*” – all actually the same word in Greek) and then there’s a few lines of criticism and, in some cases, rebuke. In the conversations I had with various people over coffee after the sermons, one person wondered aloud what might be after the “*But ...*” if Jesus were to write to us at Wade Street Church – hence the title of this morning’s sermon.

Another person told me that in a previous church they’d attended, the minister ended the series with an eighth letter, this time to that particular church. We’ve been talking in Elders’ Meeting recently about what we’re doing as a church and where we think we might be heading during 2011, and I’ve had conversations with others about the direction of the church and other issues arising from the seven letters. Having talked about all that with the other leaders, having prayed hard and having checked out with them what I might say this morning, here’s our “Eighth Letter”, the Letter To The Church In Wade Street. Some of you will have read this in *Vision* this month and I’ll say now, as I said in that article, this is not to be thought of as in any way an addition to Scripture – it doesn’t have that particular quality of God-breathed authenticity – but it is something that, I hope we can learn from. Anyway, here it is.

*To the angel of the church in Wade Street write:*

*“These are the words of the One who has conquered death and who searches with his blazing eyes. I know your deeds, your hard work and your plentiful resources. I know that you have a good reputation and you do your best to welcome visitors. You have drawn many into the activities of my church and you seek to reach out to others.*

*“But I have a few things against you. You have many who follow the example of Simon and look only to yourselves and your own salvation rather than to my greater purposes. You do not speak to me as once you did. You are complacent and timid. Repent, therefore! Otherwise I will take from you that which you have.*

*“To those who overcome I will add to their pension pot and will shape them into living stones to be built into a cathedral for my glory. Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

So, what’s it all about? What does all that mean for us? I hope some of the things we learned about the letters in *Revelation* are still in your minds, those things about the various references and images within the letters. The letter comes from Jesus, the Risen Lord, whose description we find in chapter 1 of the book, and aspects of that description are woven into the letters. Here Jesus is referred to as “*The One who has conquered death and who searches with his blazing eyes*”. This is from a Saviour who is alive and active in our world, who is concerned with our situation now, who wants to be involved in our life at the beginning of the twenty-first century just as much as he was involved in the life of the church at the end of the first century. And with his “*blazing eyes*” he can see into every corner of our lives as individuals and as a church.

Looking into the church here in Wade Street, Lichfield, he can see that this is a hard-working church. Maybe that’s not fully evident here on a Sunday – although most Sundays are busy and active – but if you

doubt it, why not drop in on a weekday morning – Monday and Thursday are particularly busy. There's lots going on and the church is very well-resourced, with money, with people, with talents. This church would tick an awful lot of boxes in a mission audit. It has a very good reputation in the community now and is well known in the city, in the Baptist Association and in the URC Synod, as well as in ecumenical groupings. We really do try to do our best to welcome people and create an atmosphere of inclusion and support, even though there will always be people who fall through the net. We'll never get it all right! And we do make an effort at outreach – although maybe not always really consciously thinking about how we do it and what the implications are. On the whole, this is a good church, with good things going for it and plenty to feel a sense of achievement about.

And then, of course, there's the “*But ...*” Just as Jesus said to the churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea, there are things that need attention. We know we're not perfect, but there are specific issues that Jesus wants us to address. And here, as in the seven biblical letters, there are allusions and references that we need to unpack a bit. At the heart of it is this reference to Simon and those who follow his example.

We read the story of Simon the Sorcerer from *Acts 8* just now. Some of the people with whom I consulted in preparation for this thought that this was some allusion to the way Simon wanted to misuse the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but the problem with Simon is far more basic than that, I think. Here is a man who is open to spiritual things and who sees the apostles in action. He sees the remarkable things that are happening, he watches the followers of Jesus at work, and he wants to get in on the action. But it is his attitude in all of that that I think is what we need to take note of. Here is someone who is wanting to be a follower of Jesus simply for what he can get out of it himself. He thinks that he will be able to make a bit of money out of this and improve his own situation. He wanted to have the gift of God (v20) so that he could prosper himself.

The “*gift of God*” in the New Testament can sometimes refer to these spiritual gifts and abilities, but more often the “*gift of God*” is the gift of salvation, of being put right with God, of having a hope for the future. In the other reading we heard this morning, from *Ephesians 2*, we see Paul making that explicit. At its most basic level, the gift of God is the gift of our salvation (*Ephesians 2:8,9*). It is God's grace, poured into our lives because of what Jesus did on the cross, that changes us and enables us to live a new life now and look forward to a resurrection life with God after death. That's very much the core of our gospel message – we offer people this amazing gift of God, we tell folks that they can be “*saved by grace through faith*”. But why do we want it for ourselves? What do we want with this gift of God? For most of us, it is simply for that knowledge that we'll be somehow secure in the future. We want to be sure that it's all going to be OK for us. We might think of it in terms of going to heaven. And many of us think of it in terms of having our prayers answered now, of knowing that we have a kind of hot-line to God so that we can cope with the things that life throws at us day by day. We feel that spending an hour or so a week in church is a pretty good trade off for the promises of prosperity, health and the odd request for a parking space when it's busy in town. We may even put a bit in the offering each week, but I reckon that if we stop and reflect for a few moments, we'd find that, like Simon, we are in this game for what we can get out of it ourselves. That's very much the malaise of contemporary western Christianity. And it was at the heart of much of the criticism that Jesus levelled at the seven churches in *Revelation*.

But *why* does Paul say that we are saved in those words to the Ephesians? Look at v10. We are not only saved, but “*created*” so that we can “*do good works*”. We are not granted this amazing gift of God so that we can sit back and take all that he offers us, so that we can sanctify our weekly immersion in the values, attitudes and actions of the world around with an hour of worship on a Sunday. We are granted this gift not exclusively for our own salvation, our own little insurance policy against fire damage in the next life. We are saved by God's grace, through faith, so that we can join God in his mission to renew the world, so that we can, by our own personal lives and through our corporate life as a church, offer our broken world glimpses of the Kingdom of God, so that we can show the people around us – our neighbours, our colleagues, our families – just what a difference Jesus can make here and now. We need to look beyond ourselves, beyond our church even, and show that we are part of the genuine Big Society

– a vision of God’s world that is far, far more than simply an excuse for financial cutbacks: it’s a vision of people living as God really intends them to.

It will mean looking very carefully at our attitudes and our values and trying to see if they are in any way influenced by the values and attitudes of Jesus Christ. After all, we are supposed to be modelling in our own situation the life that he led, the teaching that he gave, the view of the world that he expressed. Rather than taking all we can get from the world around us without a second thought as to how it fits in with what Jesus wants for us and, at the same time, trying, like Simon, to get all we can off God to give it a patina of godliness, we should be radically dissatisfied with all that we see going on around us that is not of God, all that is opposed to his will. Rick quoted Paul’s words from *Romans 12:1,2* to us last week and reminded us that we are to have minds, attitudes, value systems that are transformed by our experience of God’s mercy. We need to look not just to our own salvation and our own worldly ambitions, but to God’s greater purposes – and there will be plenty of occasions when, personally and as a church, our own ambitions collide dramatically with those greater purposes.

So what are we to do about this? Well, there are three things we need to do, which should then lead us to a fourth and faith-defining response. These are things that have come out of my thinking, out of the conversations I’ve had with several of you, and out of the discussions we’ve been having as elders and church leaders, so I have checked them out!

## **1. PRAY**

Jesus says to us that we don’t talk to him as once we did. We are not a praying church. Yes, we may be very faithful praying individuals and some of us may be quite happy to pray in small groups at housegroup or in some other specific gathering. Many of us make use of the prayer chain, either by e-mail or by ‘phone. That’s all well and good – it’s to be applauded. But when we come together for the church prayer meeting, from a congregation that is probably getting on for 200, we might have six people. We rattle around in The Darwin Room on a Tuesday evening when we should be filling The Lichfield Room. I know we all have our reasons for not getting together to pray – it’s difficult with a family, with a job, with other commitments. There’s always the genuine reason that, for some people, it’s the wrong time. But the fact remains that, as a church, we don’t come together to pray with a purpose. And I reckon that if we did, it would re-invigorate our own personal prayer lives too.

Now, we’re going to talk a bit about this at the Church Meeting next week, but just a bit of advance warning (so you can have your excuses ready) – one of the possibilities is that we keep the Church Prayer Meeting on a Tuesday evening, beginning at 7pm, but going on until 9pm so that people can come along and join us later if they can’t make 7pm. Within those couple of hours we would pray together, but there would also be an opportunity for people to pray in smaller groups for, for example, the Alpha course that is running at the same time, or for healing, or for particular projects. The details have still to be worked out, but there is something very special about praying together that we don’t experience when we are praying on our own (as, no doubt, the people who pay good money to go to prayer gatherings in London or the NEC, but won’t darken the doors of a church prayer meeting would tell you). And for those who really can’t make it, there would be the knowledge that, between 7pm and 9pm on Tuesdays, you could join in where you are for a few minutes. And, of course, there’s the Prayer Room, which is open all week. None of the rest of what we talk about or do will really be successful unless it is underpinned with prayer.

## **2. DON’T BE COMPLACENT**

As we’ve already noted, this is a well-resourced and apparently very active church. But the danger in that is the danger that faced some of the churches of *Revelation* – complacency. We think we’re doing OK. On a personal level we can easily think that we’ve made a commitment, we’re saved and we don’t really need to do any more. At a church level we can start to believe our own publicity and assume that, as it appears that God is blessing us, we’re doing everything OK. The church is almost full on a Sunday

morning. There's plenty going on during the week. We can just coast along doing the same things we've always done and it just keeps getting easier. That can lead to a couple of other things. One is a kind of mediocrity that assumes if it's working OK we don't need to put any more effort into it and so everything gets a bit slipshod.

The other is that, even if this church is full – maybe 200 people here on a Sunday – that is still less than 0.6% of the population of Lichfield. And even if you add together the Christians in all the churches in this city, there are a heck of a lot more people who have yet to discover Jesus Christ than have already committed themselves to follow him. There is no room for complacency there. We need to keep on reaching out, keep on declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ, keep on sharing our love of him and his love for us with the people amongst whom we live and work day by day. We can never, ever sit back and congratulate ourselves that we've got it all sorted out. There's still an awful lot to do and God has called us to do it with him here at the heart of this city.

### **3. DON'T BE TIMID**

But there's a third thing Jesus says to us that is linked to that sense of complacency, although it seems at first to be at odds with it. Jesus tells us not to be timid. When we find ourselves being timid, it may be because in our complacency we are scared to lose what we've got. But whatever the reason, a lack of confidence is stifling God's work in our nation today. People are increasingly fearful about sharing their faith, about speaking out. They fear persecution and ridicule. And the devil, very subtly and cleverly has got us on the back foot when there is actually no reason at all to fear that.

Many Christians have become convinced, mainly by the media and a few very vocal but misguided Christians, that everyone's against us. You know, some over-zealous council employee in a northern town tries to prevent Christmas lights being put up and suddenly everyone is saying that the government's stopping us celebrating the birth of Christ. It is patently not true that Christianity is being outlawed in this country. It might be being sidelined, but that's because many Christians, as we've already seen, are content to shout – or even just watch passively – from the sidelines rather than get on and play the game. If Christianity is being squeezed out of our national life it's because you and I are too busy protecting our own investment in it, our own personal salvation, that we just don't want to speak out. Christianity could not be any more marginalised than it was around the Mediterranean during the time of the Roman Empire, and look how the Spirit-filled, God-energised disciples of Jesus were part of an explosion of Christianity at that time. Why? Because they had a confidence in God that we have lost. We are not restricted here in Lichfield in what we say or do to communicate the message of Jesus – a biblical nativity in the Market Square, a tent at the Bower that is crowded out on Bank Holiday Monday, an opportunity to worship God on the main stage at the Fuse Festival, a team of puppeteers who visit almost every primary school in the city with the story of Jesus, preaching at Speakers' Corner, the skyline dominated by the glory of a cathedral. Let's pray about those opportunities and let's use our freedom creatively while we do have it..

Of course, our timidity sometimes comes from our lack of confidence in the Gospel. We hear of the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and others who seem to be so much cleverer than we are and we start to wonder if the Bible really is unreliable, if Jesus is just a figment of our imagination. We can't answer those who ask us about it at work. But that's very often because we simply haven't read our Bibles. We need to study God's word, to immerse ourselves in it so that we can give answers for the hope that is within us. We need to start believing that the message of Jesus is unique and life-changing. And then to encourage one another as we share our experiences, to encourage one another as we pray for each other, to encourage one another as we pray for lives to be changed. Liz challenged us after Christmas to pray for conversions, for baptisms, for new disciples. If we can pray for God to help us find a parking space or sort out our finances or help us get over the 'flu, then we ought to be able to believe that he will transform lives as well.

And often our timidity comes from a lack of confidence in ourselves. We somehow feel that we can't do it, we can't get involved in God's mission because we don't have the gifts that others have got, or that we don't have the opportunities. Remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians. "*God has prepared good works in advance for us to do.*" God has got it all sorted out. God has set it all up – he's actually waiting for us to join in. He is in control. It doesn't depend on your ability, but on his great power and strength. Writing to his young friend Timothy, Paul says this, "*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline*" (2 Timothy 1:7). God didn't give you his Holy Spirit so that you could cower away and not say anything, but so that you could speak of Jesus to those whom you meet. If, as Rick suggested last week, you let your outside reflect your inside, you let your love of God shine out in all you do, people will ask you about your faith. We need to stop being so hung-up, so weak-willed, so scared of our faith – to act and speak out! As well as more prayer, we need to engage in more evangelism as a church, more sharing of our stories as individuals. God's in control. Ultimately, you have nothing to fear.

#### **4. REPENT**

So what's the fourth thing required, the thing that grows out of all that? Well, as Jesus said to four of the churches in *Revelation*, we need to repent. We need to think again, to turn around, to refocus our thinking, to look at things from his perspective rather than our own limited view. It means stopping, taking stock and then moving off in the direction that Jesus shows us. Of course, you may think that all I've said this morning is a load of rubbish. I suspect not. You are more likely to want to pick me up on one point and argue that that's a bit harsh or just mistaken. But that doesn't detract from the overall thrust of what's been said and the bottom line is that we need to get ourselves right with God once again. It may be that there are particular things in your own life that you can identify, things which are really part of what we've been saying this morning – or maybe even something completely different. But the opportunity is there for you to respond today, to ask for Jesus' help in following where he leads, in looking at his purposes for your life, for the life of this church, rather than our own very narrow individual concerns. In a few moments we'll do that, but let's just look at the last couple of lines of this letter.

God has great things in store for us – in the immediate future, in the short term and in the long term, eternity. If you are prepared to follow him and go where he leads, then he will look after you in the long term, as if he's adding to our pension pot, something that will sustain you for all eternity and that you will be able to enjoy for ever. And as you really start to play your part in his mission here and now, then you will be like a stone, a living stone, that is built up into one of those great cathedrals of which Rick spoke last week, like the magnificent building just up the road from here. We all need to work together in that. One stone on its own doesn't have the glory of a cathedral, but the glory of the cathedral is affected if just one stone is missing or out of place. Are you ready to get involved? Will you repent of your own self-absorbed view of what the gospel is all about? Will you commit yourself to pray, to proclaim the gospel, to lose yourself in the mighty mission of God so that this community can glimpse something of the amazing, awesome, almighty Kingdom of God? Some of you are involved in the Lichfield Mysteries. I don't know if you can remember the strapline for that – "*Be a part of something amazing*". That's what God is calling us all to be.

It's always good to fix in our own minds the fact that we've made a response to what God might be saying to us, so there's an opportunity to *do* something this morning. Since writing the letter and preparing most of the sermon, I came across some pictures of cathedrals made of Lego – some of which are very grandiose. We're going to spend a few moments in silence and then as some music is played, I'm going to invite you to signify that you want to be a part of what God is doing through this church here by taking a brick from the basket and building it into a building here at the front. It won't be anything like as elaborate as the picture on the screen, but it's your way of saying, "God's speaking to me and I want to get involved – praying, witnessing, worshipping, joining together in proclaiming the gospel." The music is an instrumental version of a Stuart Townend song performed by Nick Fletcher & Dave

Bainbridge. It begins, *“Holy Spirit, living breath of God, breathe new life into my willing soul”* and the final verse contains the lines, *“Show your power once again on earth. Cause your church to hunger for your ways. Let the fragrance of our prayers arise and lead us on the road of sacrifice.”* Let’s be silent for a moment.

*Discussion questions on next page*

**"AFTER THE 'BUT ...'"**  
**Acts 8:9-25; Ephesians 2:1-10**

Following on from the studies to the Seven Churches in *Revelation*, here's a letter to us.

*To the angel of the church in Wade Street write:*

*"These are the words of the One who has conquered death and who searches with his blazing eyes. I know your deeds, your hard work and your plentiful resources. I know that you have a good reputation and you do your best to welcome visitors. You have drawn many into the activities of my church and you seek to reach out to others.*

*"But I have a few things against you. You have many who follow the example of Simon and look only to yourselves and your own salvation rather than to my greater purposes. You do not speak to me as once you did. You are complacent and timid. Repent, therefore! Otherwise I will take from you that which you have.*

*"To those who overcome I will add to their pension pot and will shape them into living stones to be built into a cathedral for my glory. Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

Jesus is referred to as *"The One who has conquered death and who searches with his blazing eyes"* – a Saviour who is alive and active in our world, who with his *"blazing eyes"* can see into every corner of our lives. He sees that this is a hard-working church with a very good reputation that makes an effort at outreach and welcome.

**BUT** there are things that need attention. Like Simon the Sorcerer (*Acts 8*) we want the gift of God for our own ends. We are not only saved, but *"created"* so that we can *"do good works"* (*Ephesians 2:10*). We are saved by God's grace, through faith, so that we can join God in his mission to renew the world, to offer our broken world glimpses of the Kingdom of God. And we are to consider the following.

### **1. PRAY**

Jesus says to us that we don't talk to him as once we did. As a church, we don't come **together** to pray with a purpose. None of the rest of what we do can succeed unless it is underpinned with prayer.

### **2. DON'T BE COMPLACENT**

We can just coast along doing the same things we've always done and it just keeps getting easier. That can lead to mediocrity and a sense of apathy.

### **3. DON'T BE TIMID**

Maybe in our complacency we are scared to lose what we've got, but a lack of confidence is stifling God's work in our nation today. Let's pray about the opportunities we have and let's use our freedom creatively while we do have it. God has got it all sorted out. He is in control. It doesn't depend on your ability, but on his great power and strength. Paul says this, *"God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline"* (*2 Timothy 1:7*). God didn't give you his Holy Spirit so that you could cower away and not say anything, but so that you could speak of Jesus to those whom you meet.

### **4. REPENT**

We need to think again, to turn around, to refocus our thinking, to look at things from Jesus' perspective rather than our own limited view. It means stopping, taking stock and then moving off in the direction that Jesus shows us. The bottom line is that we need to get ourselves right with God once again.

God has great things in store for us – in the immediate future, in the short term and in the long term, eternity. If you are prepared to follow him and go where he leads, then he will look after you in the long term, as if he's adding to your pension pot, something that will sustain you for all eternity and that you will be able to enjoy for ever. And you will be like a stone, a living stone, that is built up into a

great cathedral. One stone on its own doesn't have the glory of a cathedral, but the glory of the cathedral is affected if just one stone is missing or out of place.

*Questions overleaf*

### **Questions for discussion**

- 1.** Having read this contemporary letter, what other things do you think Jesus might have to say to us at Wade Street Church? (Try not to spend too much time being critical!)
- 2.** How can we ensure that we don't see salvation as a purely personal thing?
- 3.** Corporate prayer is one of the things that seems to be least popular in many churches. Why do you think that is? What could we do to address the issue?
- 4.** In what ways can our worship, witness and work for God become mediocre? How can we guard against that?
- 5.** Do you feel a sense of timidity about your faith? Why/why not?
- 6.** What do you understand by repentance?
- 7.** What really inspires and motivates you in your attempts to follow Jesus?