

God gives us a future

*A sermon by Alison Sampson on John 1:1-18 and Jeremiah 31:7-14
South Yarra Community Baptist Church, 3 January 2016*

I began the preparation for this sermon in tears. This time of year is often a time to reflect: to think about the year that has just passed, and to look towards the year that is to come. And when I began reflecting on the past year at South Yarra, I felt incredibly sad. A year ago, we regularly had a dozen kids in the service; it was not unusual for a third of the attenders to be children. Now, two families have moved away, and a third has stopped coming for other reasons. None of them have left because they're angry with the church; but all the same, they have left. So we're down to four kids on a Sunday – three of them my own – and things suddenly feel very different. My kids are lonely; as a mother, I am lonely; and everything's way too quiet!

Meanwhile, many of the people who formed the core of the church when I arrived thirteen years ago are suddenly in their late sixties and seventies, and some of them are beginning to be tired. I worry for them, and for our future as a church. Because, between the sudden loss of children, and the aging of the old guard, it's easy for this pessimist to feel like the church is fading away.

We live in a society which measures success by numerical growth and youthfulness, and these attitudes are deeply ingrained in the wider church. At every BUV event, someone will ask me about the size of our church: whether it is growing, and how many children attend. As an ordination candidate, the small size of the church I pastor has been made, at times, to feel like a problem. I recently mentioned to a BUV staff member that I go to lunchtime prayers at the Grace Tree Baptist Community, and the only question they asked me about it was how many people attend. In this context, it is very difficult to experience the loss of families from our congregation as nothing more than a sadness. Instead, it feels like a sign of failure: A failure to witness. A failure to keep bums on seats. A failure to love.

And when I feel like this, I begin to wonder what the point is. I begin to question whether it is worth turning up week after week, month after month, year after year, if people are just going to drift away and everything stays so small. I might as well stay at home and read a book, or flick on the telly.

Just when these feelings are at their worst, though, I get whacked over the back of the head by the living word. And it happened tonight. Tonight, we heard from John about the coming of the word, the one true light. John tells us, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." I grew up with the idea that the darkness was 'out there', while those of us who identified as Christian and went to church lived, quite simply, in 'the light'. But I no longer think this is right. John tells us very clearly that the light is not just within us, but poured out into the whole world – for "the light was the light of *all* people", not just Christian church-goers. Conversely, the gospel also suggests that the darkness can be all around us and even within us, no matter our religious affiliation.

And in this light, my sense of failure is just the darkness talking: the darkness which grows out of our insecurities, and which feeds on the lie that big is the only sign of success. It is the darkness which streams from the honeyed lips of the accuser, and tells us that our work is futile, and that our loving is no good. It is the darkness which

measures growth only in numbers, and ignores growth in the important things: faith, hope, and love; courage, generosity, hospitality; acts of creativity; acts of humble service; depth of spiritual life; commitment to prayer.

And John tells us that Jesus came into the world not to spread darkness, but to light the darkness up. We do not celebrate his birth as the arrival of another accuser, another harsh judge, another witness eager to highlight our weaknesses and our failings. His disciples do not become desiccated husks of people; Jesus does not lead us into the ways of futility and despair. He does not grant us the living death of hopelessness, or of black and shrivelled souls. Instead, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." So Jesus came into the world to fill us with new life, and encourage us, and show us how to grow. How to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh; how to enlarge our spirits; how to grow up, and grow out, and learn to love extravagantly, abundantly, generously, vulnerably – just as he did. And if we shine this living, loving, generous light on the past year, the fears and the accusations that form the darkness just... disappear. For the darkness does not overcome the light. And if we shift our attention away from the words of the accuser and towards what our advocate values, we will see that, in the last twelve months, this congregation has grown enormously.

We have grown in our life together as a church. Last February, we approved an action plan for reconciliation; and as a congregation we have taken a number of steps towards healing – including singing joyfully in Boonwurrung! We've changed how we eat together after the service, and it has led to good conversations, and deeper fellowship. Small groups have met for Table Church in the east and in the west. The hosts have re-shaped their agenda to mirror the liturgy; and while it has meant longer meetings, the meetings have been, for the most part, very life-giving. In the middle of the year, some of us had to work through a potentially explosive conflict, and by God's grace we all came out the other side intact, and still talking. We have spent time on retreat together learning new forms of prayer; we have grappled further with themes of reconciliation; we have recognised our need to rest. This is a lot of life and growth for one congregation, especially one as small as ours!

As for numerical growth: while it is true that some families have moved on, and that all of us are aging, we *have* seen the arrival of some wonderful people – mostly young people! – who have brought new life to this church. Tonight we heard from the prophet Jeremiah how God will build up his people: God will gather the people in "from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour together; a great company... With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back."

And when I look at the people who joined us last year, I see members of the very company God promised to gather in: people from overseas; people with disabilities; people who arrived weeping, and who seek consolation. They have been gathered into this congregation as we listen to the Word, sing songs of joy and lament, and reflect God's light into the world together.

How can I worry about the future of the church when it is so clearly living out God's promises: the promise of abundant life; the promise of growth in faith, hope and love;

the promise of God's people being gathered in from all the corners of the earth? God has given us a wonderful year together; and God is giving us a future.

Precisely what this future holds, I do not know. But I do know that if we remain focussed on the light, letting it shine into our areas of darkness, then darkness will not have the last word. Instead, as individuals, and as a congregation, we will continue to grow in hope, love, kindness, mercy and all the other fruits of the spirit. God's people will continue to find their way here, learning from what we have to offer, and teaching us what we need to learn. And as people who receive him and place our faith in his name, who look around and see the blessings of the past year, and the blessings which are yet to come: we can reject any feelings of failure. Instead, with the words of the gospel, we can witness with our words and our lives that "we have all received, grace upon grace." So with thanksgiving in our hearts, and great hopes for our future, let us stand, and affirm the faith of the church. Ω