A Centre Church
Acts 17:1-3; 16-23; 18:1-10; 19:1-10

So we're billing today as our Giving Sunday. And if you're new here, so you know, we don't bang on a lot about money, not least because, if you look at the research, one of the things that puts people off church is the feeling that 'they just want my money.'

But today's going to be different, not just because I'm going to talk about giving but because of the way I'm going to do it.

Because imagine you suddenly started feeling strange in the head, and you got this sudden urge to read a book on how to preach, (which would be a sign that you were really sick!), and you started reading. It would almost certainly tell you something like, 'pick your Bible text, and then tell the people what the text says, and then, right at the end, apply it to their lives, give them some take homes: 'this is what you should go and do'.

Which admittedly is *not* what I normally do, but especially not today. Because today, I want to turn everything upside down, back to front, and round the wrong way, and start with the application. And my reason for doing that is, I just want to be open with you about what I want you to do.

And that is: I want us to look at the Bible, and then each of us go home and decide how much we're going to give to our building project, and then act on that decision, preferably before the end of the month, and at latest before the end of the year. That's the application.

Now, before we look at the Bible reasons why I want you to do that, here are some practical ones. We need to raise at least 2 million francs to be in a position to buy the new building. And because of your giving we currently have 1.8 million. Which is amazing! But, we're short by around 200-300,000.

Now, the *total* cost of the building will be somewhere around 4 million, so to reach 2 million is just enough to get us over the 50% line where we can take out a mortgage.

So that's 2-300,000 to raise. Now, when it comes to money, I'm pretty simple and in our family Su does all the bookkeeping, so maybe my thinking is wonky, but let's say there are 200 of us. If we each gave 1000 before the end of the year, we could do this.

But of course, some of us, won't be able to give that much, and if that's you - give what you can. Remember the widow's copper coins. But it also means some of the rest of us are going to have to give considerably more than 1000 if we're to do this. *Plus,* the more we raise now, the less we'll have to pay in mortgage and the more there is to kit the place out.

So this is totally doable, but to do it we need God to work on our hearts so we want to give and give sacrificially - whether for the first or third time.

Which is why we're looking at Acts and at what God was doing through Paul in Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus - four strategic cities, and what that might have to say for us in Lausanne.

And we're going to see three things. Firstly, Paul's ministry was Gospel-centred. Secondly, it was campus and city-centred. And thirdly, it was others-centred.[1]

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[1] In *Center Church*, Keller talks of churches that are gospel-centered, city-centered and movement-centered.

Gospel-Centred

Now sometimes people ask me, 'What does a pastor even do all day?' Well, Luke tells us that in Thessalonica, '[Paul] reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ"' (17:2-3). And when he heads to Athens and speaks in the Areopagus he says, "I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (v23). And in Corinth, Luke tells us that, 'Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus' (18:5) And, v11, 'he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.' And then when he gets to Ephesus in chapter 19, 'He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God' (19:8). And, v11, 'This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.'

So… you're in Starbucks, in first century Ephesus, grabbing a coffee with non-other than the apostle Paul, and you ask him, 'so, what do you do all day Paul? What's with this ministry thing?' What would he reply? Probably something like: proclaiming the gospel: the life, death, resurrection, rule and reign of Christ, and *all* the implications of that for *all* people in *all* places.

But notice how he does it - firstly, in culturally appropriate ways.

In the synagogues, to Jews, Luke tells us in 17:2 that, 'He reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*.' Showing them how Jesus is the Messiah, and the fulfilment of all their hopes. But on Mars Hill, to Greek philosophers, he quotes *Greek philosophers and poets*: v27-28, 'He [God] is actually not far from each one of us, for "'In him we live and move and have our being' [a quote from Epimenides]; as even some of your own poets have said, "'For we are indeed his offspring." - a quote from Aratus. And he's showing them: their search for meaning, their very being, is answered in Christ.

But secondly, he flexes *the way* in which he does it. In the synagogues he preaches, but in the Areopagus it looks like he uses the Socratic method that the Greeks used.

But thirdly, while he flexes and shows how Christ fulfils the hopes and desires of each culture cultures, he also shows how the gospel confronts their cultures. Luke tells us in v18 that 'Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.' And those two groups held radically different views of what the good life looked like. They were like the left and right of the day. But Paul sides with neither of them, because the gospel is neither left nor right, Stoic or Epicurean. The gospel is the gospel. It affirms but it also confronts.

What's all of that got to do with you giving to the building?

Well, sometimes I hear things like, 'what's your vision for the building? I'll give if you sell me a compelling vision.' And I understand that, but to me that's like someone saying to a builder, 'what's your vision for that hammer? Tell me about the hammer!' He'd look at them like they've got a screw loose. The hammer's a tool, *and so is our building*.

A tool for the proclamation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. A tool to help us gather, grow, and go.

And Paul proclaims the gospel in culturally appropriate ways. It's what our mums are doing every Friday morning in the Ark playgroup, as mums reach out to mums. It's what our Christian Academics Group does as they reach out to their peers. It's what we're doing in here and downstairs with the kids and over the road with Class and Youth on a Sunday morning. But, in each case we are running out of space. We need a bigger

hammer. And the building will give us the tools to continue to be and to grow as a Gospel-centred church, where Christ is proclaimed as the fulfilment of all our hopes, the answer to all our desires, and in ways that confront the Stoics and Epicureans of our day.

So, just as a taster, imagine this ground-floor café space filled with young people as we do a series like Agnostics Anonymous, which we're doing at the moment, addressing the issues that cause them to doubt the Christian faith. Imagine it filled after church on a Sunday with the Christian Academics group, before they go upstairs to have lunch using the kitchen and combined meeting rooms. Imagine students or young professionals using this as a co-working space, or mums coming in here before moving upstairs for Bible study and creche.

Or take a look at the main meeting room, with seating for 5-600 people, and think about music. I've told you before, but when I was converted I started going to a really great Anglican Church, and they sang Wesley hymns, with all the different parts. I had never heard anything like it. Because there is nothing like the sound of the saints singing. And maybe you heard it on the retreat or here on a Sunday. Well, what if we were to fill that room with song? Not, 'God you are so lucky to have me', but singing the gospel.

I think I've told you this before as well, but several years ago I was invited to speak at the annual thanksgiving service for one of the ancient guilds of the City of London. And the office bearers processed through the streets and we arrived at the church, and all the great and the good were present. And right before I got up to speak, the choir sang Handel's *Zadok the Priest* - which is this spine-tinglingly magnificent anthem. And then… it was me. And I was terrified! But as I spoke I could see first this person and then that person begin to weep. And afterwards, I had people come up to me, shaking my hand and saying, 'I have never heard anything like that before.'

But what had they heard? A message about how great and good they were? Or how great and good their charitable work is? No. I told them about the Good Samaritan, and how it's you lying broken and robbed in the street, and how Christ comes to pick you up and pay all your costs, and how, when you know you've been neighboured by him, you can go and be a good neighbour to those who aren't great and good. And for some of them, it was the first time they'd ever heard the gospel.

But what tool did God use to prise open their hearts so they could hear it? Stunningly beautiful music. What if we used this building for more of that?

So, what are we going to do with the building? We're going to proclaim the gospel from it in culturally appropriate, and culturally confronting ways - so that as Jeremiah said to the exiles in Babylon, we seek the welfare, *the shalom*, of the city where God has placed us.
I want to ask you, will you give to see that happen?

Now, maybe you say, 'well, I don't know, I don't really feel called to give.' If that's you, let me just give you a bit of a nudge, from William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army.

'Not called!' did you say? 'Not heard the call,' I think you should say. Put your ear down to the Bible, and hear him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help. Go stand by the gates of hell, and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers and sisters, and servants and masters not to come there. And then look Christ in the face, whose mercy you have professed to obey, and tell him whether you will *join heart and soul and body and circumstances in the march to publish his mercy to the world*."

Church, let's publish his mercy to the world. Or at least to our little corner of it.

But as you think about this, don't give out of guilt, give out of the gospel and our of gospel joy. When Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth to encourage them to give to the suffering church in Jerusalem he holds up the example of their Macedonia brothers and sisters. Because before the Macedonians gave *financially*, Paul says, 'They gave themselves *first to the Lord* and *then* by the will of God to us' (2 Cor 8:5). Why in that order? Because the gospel had taken root in their hearts. Because they knew what Paul tells the Corinthians, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (8:9). 'Why should you give?', Paul says, because the Son of God gave himself for us. And when you know that, you want to give of yourself and your resources, to Christ.

But secondly, Paul's ministry was…

Campus and City-Centred

And it's so obvious it's easy to miss, but if over the retreat we saw Paul and Barnabas basing themselves in Antioch, here we see Paul proclaiming the gospel in Thessalonica, then Athens, then Corinth, and then Ephesus. And they're all cities.

Fifty years ago next year, John Stott framed the first Lausanne Covenant on world evangelisation and in his commentary on Acts, Stott writes, 'It seems to have been Paul's deliberate policy to move purposefully *from one strategic city-centre to the next*.' Why? Well, obviously, it's where people lived and worked. So more people could be reached by reaching the cities.

And, stating the obvious, Lausanne is a city, and our new building is going to be right in the middle of where people live and work.

But Stott argues that Paul targeted cities for another reason as well, and that's the spreading influence they could have. It's not just that people are in cities, *it's that they leave them - o*n business, after studies, or just moving on. And ideas spread from them. And so, for Paul, cities became radiating centres of gospel ministry.

Think of Thessalonica - capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. And the church there became an example even beyond their own region, *not* because it was *so amazing* but because it wasn't, because it was just healthy. Listen to what Paul writes to them, 'You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere' (1 Thess 1:7-8).

Or think of Athens, university city of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. A city of architectural and academic brilliance, with the brightest students of the empire flocking in, before spreading back out around the empire.

And when Paul arrives, what does he see? Does he spend his days sightseeing, admiring the magnificent buildings? No. Chapter 17:16, 'he saw that the city was full of idols.' Drowning under a sea of them. But what does the sight of all these idols do to Paul? Verse 16 again, 'his spirit was provoked within him.'

Now, maybe you look at what's going on in society, and the impact it's having on young people, and maybe you feel something of the ache in Paul's heart. I hope you do.

But what are we going to do about it?

You see, Paul doesn't just rant from his armchair like a middle-aged culture warrior. But neither does he throw up his hands in despair and retreat to the hills because the battle is lost.

What does he do? He dives right in and heads to Mars Hill, to the Areopagus - the university campus of the day and proclaims that the God they're all searching for is Christ.

Or think of Corinth. Because if Athens was the *intellectual* centre, Corinth was the *commercial and sporting* centre, host of the Isthmian games and standing on an international crossroads. And as Stott argues, Paul must have thought, "if trade could radiate from Corinth in all directions, so could the gospel."

Or think of Ephesus - not just capital of the Roman province of Asia but a centre for worship of the emperor, whose temple to the goddess Artemis, Diana, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And Luke tells us that it was there that Paul was 'reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus' (19:9).

Now, we don't know exactly who Tyrannus was, but commentators agree that he was probably a philosophy lecturer who was happy to rent his hall out to Paul after his own lectures were over. And his name means, *Tyrant*. Though, as one commentator says, whether that was the name given him by his parents or his pupils we don't know.

Whichever it was, Paul rented his hall and used it as a tool, to *reason* - to show how the gospel made intellectual sense in a city that had given itself over to the worship of power and nature and sex.

So… what have these cities got to do with us?

Well, what if Lausanne could become a radiating centre of gospel ministry? Are we Athens? No, but students and academics come here from all over the world before heading back elsewhere. What if we could grow in our capacity to influence them for Christ while they're here?

And as you look at Paul diving into that sea of idols and heading for campus of the University of Athens, our new building is going to be right in the thick of campus. New health school on one side, University of Lausanne and EPFL on the other, with students daily walking past our doors. If Paul dived in, why would we sit on the edge?

Is Lausanne Corinth? No. But the business and sport organisations you guys work for? Maybe. So couldn't the gospel radiate from here as it did from Corinth? So… what about using this space to host something on sport and faith, or work and faith in addition to academics and faith?

Are we Ephesus? No. But think about Paul and the Hall, because maybe you're thinking 'I'm not sure about giving to this when we won't even get to own the main meeting room.' And I get that. But did Paul own the Hall of Tyrannus? No. But he still used it as a centre for gospel spreading. And at least our owners are Christians and not tyrants!

Or, maybe - as I've heard suggested - we should take our money and build something all our own, up in the foothills of the Jura somewhere. And believe me, I love the Jura, and I love cows, and I love cheese, but where do we want to be? I mean we're going to have the Health School on one side and the Gender Studies department on the other! *Where would you rather be?!* CT Studd, the great British missionary who founded WEC, the World Evangelisation Crusade said, "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop, within a yard of hell."

Church, this building, right in the middle of where people live and work and study can be our rescue shop. Let's give to that! As Christopher Watkins says in his great book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 'there is nothing so radically subversive today as sound doctrine and godly living.'

Let's be the radical subversives of the day! Let's give so we can gather, grow and go.

But thirdly, Paul's ministry was…

Others-Centred

And over the weekend we saw how Paul and Barnabas fell out over Mark, but no one could ever accuse Paul of not investing in others.

Firstly, this Book of Acts was written by Luke, not Paul. Why? Because Paul scooped Luke up and added him to the team. In Acts 15, he brings Silas on board. In Acts 16, he adds Timothy. In Acts 17, we read of Jason in Thessalonica and Dionysius and Damaris in Athens. In Acts 18, he's investing in Aquilla and Priscilla, and they invest in Apollos. Look at Romans chapter 16, and you see one name, one family, one household after another who Paul has influenced for the gospel.

What's that got to do with the building?

Well, parents, think of your kids or youth. And those who don't have kids here, think of their kids - because they're *our* kids, *our* youth. Then look at these rooms. These can become the places where, as a church, we continue to have an influence for good and the gospel in their lives, and that where that influence grows as, in turn, they influence others.

Or, remember our event for Pride month? What if we could run a whole series of events applying the gospel to contemporary issues, controversial or not, and use the café area, or the combined rooms upstairs, or the big hall to do it, and equip not just ourselves, but outsiders and other churches as well?

But… if we're to do any of that, we've got to give to see it happen. And not just to the building, but regularly to the church.

Now, maybe you're thinking, 'yeh but we won't be around to see any of that, we'll have moved on by then.' Sure, but isn't that the whole point of being others-centred? Isn't that the whole point of the gospel? You see, when Jesus went to cross, he wasn't going for his benefit; and when he paid the price of sin, it wasn't his price he was paying. And right at the heart of the gospel is not self-interest, but the radical self-sacrifice of Christ. A love that gives and goes.

Let's be a church that does likewise. Let's be those who give, not just our resources but ourselves, *not* because we benefit but *precisely because we don't.* Because that's what Jesus did for us.

Together, let's proclaim Christ, because we're gospel-centred; let's dive into the battle, because we're campus and city-centred; and let's pour ourselves out for others, heart and soul, body and circumstances, publishing this mercy to the world, because we're others-centred.

Let's give generously now, before the end of the month, end of the year, and let's give regularly. Details are in the newsletter, or on cards at the welcome desk or coffee area. And let's give, not because we want to

make our name great, but to see happen here what happened in Ephesus: ‘The name of the Lord Jesus was extolled… [and] the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.’ (Acts 19:17, 20).