The Building God does Care About
Go!

As I explained earlier, we're in the process of seeing if we can raise the funds to buy or build our own building. And as we do that, there's this danger that we lose our way and begin to think that life and church is all about bricks and buildings, and money and targets. And because we don't want to do that, we want instead to remind ourselves of what God's vision for his church really is, the Building God *Does* Care about. And we've looked at Gather – and how Jesus promises to build his church, the gathering, the congregation of his people. Then last week we looked at Grow, and how we gather as church to grow up into Christian maturity, and how that maturity looks like a life of service to God and to others. And today, we're going to look at our last one – which is Go!

Read Acts 1:1-8

Now, just imagine for a moment that we were able to come to some sort of agreement with the city, and take on a historic church building, like Croix d'Ouchy, and renovate it. And we lit it up and made it beautiful, and sorted out the acoustics, and put in toilets and added rooms for Sunday school etc. Would that be it? On the day we signed a deal, or completed the renovation, could we sit back, and pat ourselves on the back and say, 'great job, mission accomplished!'? Or, imagine we were able to buy a plot of land within walking distance of the universities, and we were able to build something modern and functional. When we cut the ribbon at the grand opening, would that be it? Could we kick our feet up and say, 'we've made it! That was a mountain to climb, but we did it, we've reached the peak!'

And the answer's 'No!' Because any building we ever get is not the vision, it's simply the means to help us achieve God's vision for his church. So if we were to take on a historic church in the city centre, it would be to become a base for reaching out with the gospel to the city, of running courses like Christianity Explored that introduced people to the historic, life-changing Christian faith in a historic building, itself brought back to life; or if we were to build something from scratch, it would be for it to become a base for reaching out to international students, or showing the enduring relevance of Christianity to the intellectual pursuit, or the world of business, or of showing the welcome and love of God to migrants.

So any building we ever get will not be 'it' – the 'it' will only just have begun. And Jesus' parting words here to the disciples tell us why.

A Dark World

Recently, Naomi and Lukas, my eldest daughter and son-in-law, were driving home through Gstaad and the sheer beauty of the area struck them – the green of the mountains against the backdrop of the clear blue sky. But they told me that as they were filled with the joy of what they were experiencing, it dawned on them that across the globe others were experiencing something very different. Whether that is life under ISIS; or the rise of nationalism and sectarianism; or the thousands of Rhohingyas fleeing violence in Myanmar; or the abduction of a little girl at a wedding in France; or the growing problem of drugs in Lausanne, or sex

trafficking on the streets. And so whilst on a beautiful day in Switzerland it can sometimes be hard to believe, the truth is the world is dark.

But why is it so? Well, the answer is that the human heart is dark. As Jeremiah the prophet wrote over 2500 years ago, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' (Jer 17:9). And nothing has changed in the intervening years, has it. And so much of the darkness of the world is man made – a result of our innate selfishness and pride, of wanting to use power to advance ourselves. As the author Andrew Walker writes in his book, God and the Transgender Debate, 'This is a beautiful world. But it is also a broken one. And it is filled with humans who are capable of great good and of great mistakes, who can reach great heights but who are fundamentally flawed.'

Now, I bet that if I were to ask you, do you see the problems with the world, you'd say, yes; and do you want to be part of the solution, you'd say absolutely, sure I do – that you want to do your bit to making the world a better place. And yet, if we're honest with ourselves, what we discover is that, in reality, we're also part of the problem. Because it's not just others who are selfish by nature, and want their own way; it's not just others who tend to use people rather than serve them; or use power for their own advantage rather than for others. We all have this tendency. Even, it seems, Jesus' disciples.

You see, look what happens in this passage. Jesus has been talking to them, v3, 'about the kingdom of God.' And they ask, v6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now, what lies behind that question? Is it, as some commentators suggest, a genuine concern that God's kingdom be established in Israel? That having witnessed the resurrection, these guys are now eager for the long awaited Messianic age to begin – an age that will bring blessing to the world? Maybe; but more than one commentator suggests that the disciples have totally missed the point. Jesus has been talking of God's kingdom, God's just and loving reign that will extend across the world, but what they're interested in is Israel, their own ethnic group. They're thinking like narrow nationalists; they're thinking in terms of national status and territory and geopolitics. They're thinking power for their own, for people just like them, and to be rid of the Romans and the yoke of their power. They want to be on the ascendancy once more. Enough of this decline! Make Israel Great Again.

But, of course, that was the tragedy of Israel. The Old Testament tells us that from the very beginning humanity was created to image God and his loving rule in creation – to be his ambassadors to the world. And the people of Israel were chosen to be a blessing, a light to the nations. But they failed. They chased after other gods, gods of power, gods that let them live the way they wanted to live, that let them indulge their selfishness and self-centredness, and Israel – supposed to be a light – slipped into darkness.

Now have you ever had to get up in the middle of the night, and it's pitch dark, and you can't find the light switch? And you're fumbling around, groping in the dark, and you just can't find it. But what if you *did* finally find it, and turned it on, only to find the bulb has blown? What you thought would give you light fails you.

And that's life, isn't it? Israel, you and me, people across the world think that this or that – power, prestige, influence, success, will give us the security and the happiness we're looking for. But they're all false bulbs. And as we pursue them, the darkness around us worsens.

Which is why we need a light from outside us.

The Light of the World

Now, have you ever done that experiment where you try and get a seed or a bean to sprout and grow? And you put one on a plate with water and cotton wool, and put it in a dark cupboard, and you put another near a window in the sunshine. What happens to the one in the dark? It doesn't grow. Or if it does, it's weedy and pale and shrivelled. But the one in the sunshine shoots up! It's green, it's alive, it's bursting up and out.

And if you and I, and people in our city, or across the world, are to thrive, and grow into all we are meant to be as humans, we need light. But what light? When I was a paediatric doctor, I remember one day sitting on the bedside of a little 6 year old boy. And he had been admitted to our ward because he had been brought to the emergency department with an unexplained injury. And the staff there had noticed that across his face he had the imprint, and bruising, of an adult hand. And as I sat there chatting to him, I heard the door behind me open, and I watched as this little boy froze in fear as he saw who came in the door. And I turned around, and it was his father. That evening I drove home, walked in the door of our house and I couldn't get more than a few feet inside before I had four girls clinging to my legs, demanding hugs and kisses, and I had to bat them off to get in. We thrive, we flourish, we live, under the smile of a father.

And that is what Psalm 67 that we had read to us earlier is all about: verse 1, 'May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.' And to have God smile upon you, that's the light, that's the ultimate in well being. And in all our searching, in all our trying this or that light switch, what we're really seeking for is that smile, the smile that says, you are loved, you are wanted, you are accepted, you are safe. As GK Chesterton said, the man who knocks on the brothel door is a man looking for God.

But where can you find that smile of God? How can you find that light under which you'll thrive? Well, the gospels tell us it came to find you. John opens his gospel by saying of Jesus, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:4-5). And when he began his ministry Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). Now, when Jesus said that, did he mean he would heal the *physically* blind? Sure he did, and he did. But he meant more than just that – he meant that he would open the eyes of our hearts, so that light might flood in, so we might see the truth, and understand, 'so that's what life's about!', so that we might see and feel the smile of the Father.

But how does he do it? How does he make it possible that God might smile upon people like us who by nature of selfish and self-centred? By dying for us. By taking our pride and our selfishness, all our self-centredness, all those times when we use power for ourselves, he takes it upon himself at the cross. And there the Father turned his face away. The One who had heard the words, 'this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased' now cried out, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?'; as darkness enveloped him, as the Father turned his smile away, so that, in the words of Psalm 67, his face might shine upon us. That's how Jesus does it!

And the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is 'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1:3). And it's in Jesus that you can know that smile of God under which you'll thrive, the graciousness and the blessing of God, for which you and everyone longs.

Now, Autumn is coming, and that means that soon the cloud will descend on the lake, and there can be days when you don't see the sun. When that happens, sometimes we'll drive up into the Jura, and to start with it's just grey and cold, but then the cloud begins to thin, and you start to see light coming through, and then you're out and into the sunshine, and suddenly life is worth living again. And when you know the forgiveness of God in Christ, when you know your relationship with him restored through Jesus' death and resurrection, and his Spirit making your heart new, life really is worth living.

But here's the thing. You see in Psalm 67 the Psalmist is drawing on Aaron's blessing over the people of Israel – 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace' (Num 6:24-26). But that blessing of Israel was just that – it was for Israel. But in Psalm 67 the psalmist sees that blessing, that smile of God, extending way beyond Israel's national borders: verse 2, 'That your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.' That's why we want your smile, that's why we need your grace he says, so that the whole world might experience them too. In other words, you and I are not blessed, and Israel then, and the church now, are not blessed for ourselves alone. It's so that the nations might hear and see. That the light of God might shine upon them.

Go Into All The World

Ajith Fernando has been the director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka for over three decades. He tells a story about William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army. The time came when Booth was too frail and too sick to attend the annual conference of the Army. So in his place he sent a telegram that was only to be opened when everyone was together at the main meeting. And when they opened it, it said just one word: "Others". You see, the disciples in Acts 1, down to us today, have this tendency to think of ourselves. And William Booth said 'Others' – because Jesus said it first: Acts 1:8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." That was the vision of a man like William Booth. It was the vision of the Psalmist in Psalm 67, which is why

one commentator calls that psalm the Psalm of the Spreading Circle. And it has always been God's vision: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. And so any building we ever get, any budget we ever set, has got to keep that vision. It can never be for just gather, or even gather and grow, it's for go.

Now, the disciples got the Jerusalem and Judea bit, didn't they? Because that was people just like them. That was Israel. But Samaria? The ends of the earth? That's people who are unlike us. I mean, the Samaritans, they're compromised. They're racially, ethnically, theologically, morally compromised. Sure. And Jesus says, 'go to them.' And the ends of the earth – the Gentiles? They're not just compromised, they are totally unlike us – I mean, Jesus, you're talking the Romans who tried to destroy us, you're talking the Greeks who spread a lifestyle, a pagan world view, totally at variance to ours! And Jesus says, 'Sure. Go to them.'

But what can give you the power to do that? To reach out to, and love those, who are so different from you? Secular liberalism can't do that, can it – because it has no power to change the heart. We saw that very clearly in Charlottesville. Decades of secular liberalism have left societies more divided than ever. But neither can religious or moral conservatism, because that just leaves you feeling morally superior to those you think are not as good as you, who are unlike you.

Only the gospel, in the power of the Spirit, can do it, as Jesus says, v8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." So Jesus does offer them power, but it's not a power for themselves or their own ethnic identity, it's a power that will enable others to hear and see. You see, the gospel, what Jesus has done for you, in making it possible that God would smile upon you, first humbles you. It tells you, and shows you, that you are no better than anyone else, that your moral character, your skin colour, your ethnic background, none of those stand before a holy God. It tells you you are so bad the Son of God had to die for you. But it doesn't humble you to leave you there. It lifts you up, as you put your trust in Christ, his Spirit enters you and tells you 'you are loved by God', and he makes you new, he takes off the blinkers, and begins to transform you.

So, the gospel humbles you. And the gospel lifts you up. But then it sends you.

But to do what? 'To be my witnesses'. To testify to the death, and the resurrection, and the life changing power of Jesus; to the smile of God upon your life. Now, these first disciples, they were witnesses in a unique way, in a way you and I can never be. And we have their witness, their testimony, here in the gospels. But that call to go still stands. As Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew 28, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations… teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Jesus told them to Go, and through them, he tells us to go, So that, in the words of Psalm 67, 'Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.'

So, as we finish, briefly, what is that going to look like for you and me? What does it mean to 'go' so the nations would be glad and sing for joy. Well, firstly, in their book, Good Faith: being a Christian when society thinks you're irrelevant and

extreme, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons write, 'Jesus gave his followers the Great Commission as a community, not as a solo project.' So this is something we do together as his people. We gather, we grow, and we go together.

But secondly, think what Jerusalem and Judea might mean – people who are like you: on campus, or in your office – people who, like us, need to know the smile of God but are trying all the wrong switches, knocking on all the wrong doors, searching everywhere else. Go to them. Befriend them. Have them over. And Samaria and the ends of the earth – people unlike us, migrants, or refugees, maybe even French-speakers! And in our praying, and in our giving, and in our living, we can go to them. We can pray for and fund Bible translation through the Seed Company, and Bible distribution in Iran. Maybe you will never go to Myanmar, but you can pray for and financially support young Burmese men and women already there who are going. Your student days may be far behind you, but through praying and giving and extending hospitality to them, you can go to them. And as Joel Bussy from CABES so often reminds us, in some ways you don't need to go to the nations, at this point in history the nations are coming to us. And some of you have volunteered on the camps, or run craft or dance classes, or weekly sports events for the refugees. You don't need to be a great evangelist. You just need to take the gifts and the skills God has already given you and go. Why? Because they too need to see and hear and feel the light of the smile of God in Jesus Christ just like us.

So, today, take some time to think and to pray, God where would you have me go – in my praying, in my giving, and in my living.