

"SET YOUR SIGHTS HIGHER"

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Before I prepared this message, I asked God how he would sum up in a few words what he wanted to say to us today. I believe he said, "Set your sights higher".

With the world getting darker and more opposed to God, and therefore more opposed to his church, it is time to reset our sights on our targets.

- *Set our sights higher in terms of how we perceive God and relate to him.
- * Set our sights higher in terms of how we perceive ourselves, to get to the place where we see ourselves as God sees us.
- *Set our hopes and expectations higher, being led by the Spirit.

Let's look again at the scripture that Cynth read to us (John 3:22-36). At first glance it appears to focus on John but we soon see it is revealing Jesus and his people. I'm going to be focusing on John's reply to his complaining disciples. They come like children complaining that somebody else is getting the attention and it's just not fair. The difference between John and his disciples is that he had a revelation of who Jesus is and they hadn't. He had told them but they had not grasped it. So when they whinge about Jesus taking over from John, he replies in verses 27-30:

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, "I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him." The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.

In an earlier chapter,

John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven and remain on him. I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God. John 1:29-34.

'I would not have known except the one who sent me told me.' We all need that revelation of who Jesus is, through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, the Holy Spirit, revealing truth to our hearts.

Going back to John 3 and coupling verses 27 and 30 together: John says:

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. He [the Christ, the Lamb of God] must become greater; I must become less.

As far as heaven was concerned, John had been the greatest man on the planet. Jesus later said,

I tell you, among those born of women, there is no greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than he. Luke 6:28

What did Jesus mean by that? Anyone born again by the Spirit of God is greater than the greatest natural-born person in the world. We need to be on our guard lest pride takes over: it is a cause for humility knowing the greatness comes through faith in Jesus making us new creations, and seeing ourselves as God sees us; submitting to the Holy Spirit, surrendering our lives so that he takes over.

In a prayer meeting this week, we took it in turns to read out verses from Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17. My stint included Jesus praying,

they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. (v14)

There is something powerful about reading it out loud and I had to stop. Awesome: Jesus said that his disciples were no more of the world than he is of the world. And he repeats the statement:

They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. (16)

Who is not of the world? Ordinary men, some unschooled, sometimes stropy and argumentative, ambitious, slow to understand, slow to believe, divisive, disloyal. But chosen by Jesus. And in Jesus' prayer he prayed,

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who believe in me through their message. (20)

Let's just stop and meditate on this:

Jesus has said that his disciples, including us, are not of this world any more than he is of the world. We are citizens of heaven. Paul wrote:

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Philippians 3:20-21

Being a citizen counts. When Roman guards stretched Paul out to flog him, he revealed his Roman citizenship and said, "Is it legal to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" And the Roman commander himself was alarmed when he realised that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. The commander had told Paul that he had to pay a big price for his Roman citizenship but Paul said "But I was born a citizen." See Acts 22: 22-29. We cannot buy our citizenship in heaven. The price is too high, so high that only Jesus could pay it for us and he paid

with his life, his blood sacrifice, so that we might be born again, a new creation, a citizen of heaven. IF we repent, turn from our sins and believe in him alone.

Does that change how we see ourselves? Does it help us to set our sights higher? Jesus includes all who are born again by the Spirit of God. Do you know you are born again by the Spirit of God? Our higher identity comes only from God, being born of the Spirit. (See John 3:5-8) Does your identity come from being born again of the Spirit to be a son or daughter of the Most High God? Is the Holy Spirit active in you?

Returning to John's reply again. He was humble. He said, "I must become less." He had been top man, ministering for we don't know how long, drawing followers away from the empty rules of the Pharisees, calling ordinary people to change, including soldiers and tax-collectors who asked, "What do I need to do?" Calling them to repent and be baptised in water. His disciples had got used to him being top man, being the baptiser, so they couldn't initially handle it when Jesus and his disciples took over. But John stepped back, making himself less because he knew the person of Jesus Christ.

In verse 28, John said "I am not the Christ but I am sent ahead of him." Then he has an amazing revelation of the bride and the bridegroom. As far as I am aware this is the first reference to the bride of Christ and it is revolutionary, radical, awesome. Because you can't have a bride without a bridegroom. And in the culture of the day, even if not always now, the bride was chosen by the bridegroom and belonged to the bridegroom. Jesus said to his disciples,

"You did not choose me but I chose you." John 15:16

Jesus also chose us, chose you and me. The bride: who is the bride? You and me together with all believers, if we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, is our Lord. And God is preparing the bride for his Son, for Jesus, for eternity. Does that set your sights higher?

John, in this passage, says, the bride belongs to the groom. (v29) She belongs to the groom, to Jesus, not to anyone else. John is, in effect, declaring that all the people he preached to, were baptised by him and followed him did not belong to him. Only if they are baptised with fire, the purifying Holy Spirit will they belong to anyone, and that one is Jesus.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 2 Corinthians 1:21-22

The importance of being chosen is powerfully illustrated in the story of Ruth. She was widowed and both her sons had died, she was from a foreign religion and a foreign land, she was an alien, she accompanied her widowed mother-in-law, she was so poor that she had to pick up scraps of grain left behind by the harvesters, she was defenceless against the risk of being molested. Yet an influential landowner in Israel chose her as his wife and she became the grandmother of David.

John identifies himself as a friend of the bridegroom. We might see him as the Best Man. He had been waiting and listening for the bridegroom. He is the first to describe Jesus as the bridegroom, again by revelation of the Holy Spirit. He is waiting and listening—it speaks of expectation, excitement, anticipation. He knew the bridegroom was coming and, when he eventually heard Jesus' voice, he was full of joy. Jesus taught that his sheep know his voice. If we are his sheep as well as his bride, do we wait for his voice, listening in expectation, and are we joyful when we hear him?

In all these things we can feel we have failed, not matched up to God's expectations, missed out on God's plans for us, stuck, grounded. But we have hope because God can lift us up. Recently, I remembered an incident from a few years back, like a parable, and I instantly knew its interpretation.

Cynth and I were walking along Newport Street in Tiverton. On the pavement was what looked to me like a dead bird but Cynth recognised it as a swift. Swifts are fantastic fliers but, because they spend their lives in the air, they have no strength in their legs. Once they are grounded they are stuck, cannot take off and they die. This one was grounded with its wings spread out and its body pressed to the ground. Cynth picked it up and cradled it in her hands. The bird lay completely still. Cynth suggested we took it to somewhere raised up to see if we could launch it, so we walked into St Peter's Churchyard. I climbed up onto a big tomb and Cynth passed the swift up to me. Then I held my arms as high as I could and simply opened my hands. The swift took off and flew away. What a joy for us both.

The interpretation of that incident was that God's church is grounded, individually and corporately. But if we submit to him and let him pick us up, he will lift us up and enable us to fly, as he intended us to. Isaiah 40 says that those who hope in the Lord will rise up on wings like eagles.

Continuing with the second part of John's response. In verse 34, he said,

The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

Wow! We know God gave his Spirit to John to prepare the way for Jesus, we know the Holy Spirit came like a dove and stayed on Jesus, we know he gave his Spirit to the apostles and to 3000 believers who waited in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Do we believe that he gives his Spirit to all believers? Do we believe God when he promised that in the last days

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.... Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. See Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2: 17-21

If it was the last days when Peter quoted Joel's prophecy, how much more so now. John said that God gives his Spirit without limit. Whether we need to be baptised in the Holy Spirit or filled and refilled with him, we need to be filled today. Come Holy Spirit.

In the Book of Revelation, the Holy Spirit and the bride of Christ agree, saying:

"Come! And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes let him take the free gift of the water of life.
Revelation 22:17.

As we sing this next song, may we make it a prayer from our hearts, that God would indeed breath on us, his breath is his Holy Spirit.

[Breathe on us breath of God]

As I said at the beginning

*Set our sights higher in terms of how we perceive God and relate to him.

* Set our sights higher in terms of how we perceive ourselves, to get to the place where we see ourselves as God sees us as the bride of Christ, chosen by him, no more of this world than Jesus is, sealed with his ownership.

*Set our hopes and expectations higher, being lifted by God himself, being led by the Spirit, being filled and filled and filled with his Holy Spirit.

A final verse of scripture:

Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, you also will appear with him in glory. Colossians 3:1-4

[Prayer and offering ministry]