

Good morning, my name's James. I'm one of the vicars here at B&A Church.

Just that sentence in itself needs a bit of explanation. In most churches, there's one vicar, one person who's in charge. Here, Wayne and I have decided to share it. So that's a bit different. As is our name. People asked - why is it called B&A Church? Well, about 8 years ago we began to make the journey from being three churches in three buildings towards being one church in one building. As we made that journey we decided to let go of our three inherited names, St Bart's, St Michael's and Church of the Good Shepherd and to find one new name. This is the Parish of Bishopston and St Andrews. So we abbreviated that, as best we could and went for "B&A Church".

During that time, God has led us on an extraordinary journey. Selling the Church of the Good Shepherd to Emmanuel, Bishopston, selling St Michael's to Horfield Baptist Church, preparing to sell St Bart's and moving here, to our new home. It's not just been those transactions that have been extraordinary, we've found God leading us from being a lovely church to being a church that has been making a real difference in the world around us.

About five years ago, I heard someone say that their church had once been like a cardboard box of puppies, licking each other - lovely to look at but having no impact on the world. Wayne and I felt compelled to share that illustration with the core leaders at B&A, asking whether the world around us would notice if we disappeared overnight. God has done a profound work in the last five years. If we disappeared tonight, refugees, ex-offenders, the lonely, the hungry, young parents, addicts and frontline colleagues would be bereft. If you tell other Christians in the city that you go to B&A Church, they no longer look at you with a confused face, they go 'Oh yeah, those are the guys that do stuff, they feed people'.

When Wayne and I look back, we can see that God has been at work, leading us through different challenges and stages, towards the bigger vision to which we believe

we're called as leaders, and as a church. Wayne and I are committed to a long-term work here in Bristol.

Our deep conviction is that God wants to use everyday Christians to bring His Kingdom here to this earth, seeing this city changed along the way. Imagine a city where prison numbers, food poverty, family breakdown and addiction all decrease. All of these things happen as the church grows. The preaching of Wesley and Whitfield is largely credited with helping the UK from descending into revolution around the same era as France. Decades of evangelism and church growth which led, in turn, to societal change through figures like Willam Wilberforce, whose faith led him to a deep conviction that the slave trade was an evil that needed to cease. So we know from history, the journey to earth looking more like heaven isn't short or simple. But we're committed to that journey and to breaking the journey down into stages. This morning, I want to talk a bit about this next stage.

Before I do that, I just need to clarify the long-term work we're pursuing. It's difficult to get accurate data on how many people in this city follow Jesus (only the Lord knows), but the best estimates are around 5%. So, if around 100 people die this week in the city, (which is roughly the amount that die each week in a city of this size), the likelihood is that only 5 of those will be going to heaven. Only 5. As someone who grew up thinking that he was growing up in a Christian nation, I find that really challenging to hear. To put that into perspective, it's thought that of the second wave of immigrants to move from Hong Kong to the UK, between 2021 and 2022, around 40% are Christians. So great to have some of you with us here at B&A. We no longer live in a nation of Christians and we need to wake up to that.

For just a moment, I want us to draw us back to thinking about those 95 who die each week in this city, not knowing Jesus. The Bible and 2000 years of Christian creeds and teachings, tell us that their eternal destiny is not in Heaven but in Hell. If they've had an adequate opportunity to hear the gospel and have said 'no', then there's not much more that the church can do. What gets me going is that amongst those 95 will be people who

didn't get to hear the gospel clearly and didn't get to see what a thriving local church looks like. If you're here and you're not sure of your eternal destiny, you can leave this building knowing that you are going to heaven. Let me come back to you on that in a bit.

Evidence indicates that most of the thriving churches are in the city centre and just to the north of it. Further evidence suggests that most of the people who go to those churches are drawn from the suburban north. Churches in the outer perimeter of the city, particularly in the areas of deprivation, tend to be small and struggling to move from maintaining their churches into mission. So if you live in Southmead, just up the road, the chances of you hearing the gospel and finding a thriving local church that you can reach (because you may not have a car) are a lot smaller than if you live in Bishopston. It is not stretching the truth to say that there is a postcode lottery on salvation in this city - by which I mean that you are more likely to find Jesus if you grow up in wealth than if you grow up in poverty. Fundamentally I think that is wrong and we have a moral and spiritual responsibility under God to reverse that.

Wayne and I want to say that the decisions we have been making and will continue to make are with that issue in mind. Everyone in this city should get to hear the gospel and be able to reach a thriving local church. If it takes decades to do, it takes decades to do, but it needs to be done properly.

What's this next stage about, then? Well, previously we talked about 'Following Jesus Together and Making a Difference in the Lives of Others'. That phrase was first used as we were emerging from the pandemic. It described who we were as a church. It wasn't false advertising. If you joined B&A between 2021 and the summer of 2023, that phrase described the church we were. Aside from being a bit of a mouthful, we found that phrase didn't point enough to the growing need to share our faith in words with other people. Across the church there was a growing sense that it wasn't enough to make a difference, we needed to point to the one who makes THE difference, Jesus.

Alongside that, we began to see three other shifts taking place.

Firstly, God gave us this crazy city-wide food ministry, B&A Meals, blessing churches in areas of deprivation with free food, enabling them to talk with non-Christians about Jesus. In December, free food was sent from our kitchen to serve the hungry at churches in Filton, Lockleaze, Redcliffe, Knowle West, Avonmouth, Easton and the City Centre.

Secondly, God then blessed us with this stunning building, which is more than a local church. If you haven't been in the rest of the building yet, this space here is just one third of the space. This church building is designed to be a resource for more than just this part of the city. It is a storehouse.

Thirdly, since we moved in here in September, we have baptised 7 people and saw a further 6 become Christians. So that desire to see lives changed by Jesus is bearing fruit.

With these changes and the desire to point people to Jesus, the one who makes THE difference, we wanted to put language on this next stage. For this next stage, we want to be known for 'Bringing Bristol to Jesus'. You'll hear us doing that a lot and talking about it a lot, until it becomes so natural that we've reached the next stage and we'll need another phrase.

For the last 7 years, we've had the practice of working our way through a book of the Bible on Sundays, not avoiding the bits we don't like. So when we did Genesis we did Sodom and Gomorrah and when we did Acts we did Ananias and Sapphira. We're not keen on cherry picking passages to suit our agenda. In late November, I was asked to put together the sermon series for these next three months, to explain the vision of B&A Church.

Instead of picking my favourite verses for this month, I've picked everyone else's favourite verses. John 3:16 and Jeremiah 29:11 are the two most searched for verses

on the internet in the UK. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that they are the two most popular verses of the Bible in the UK. I would guess there's a fair few people here today for whom those verses are amongst their favourite verses in the bible, not just because you like the sound of them, but because they enable you to connect with God deeply in your soul.

What's interesting to me is that when you put them together, they speak into what God's doing here at B&A. Let me explain.

You see, Bringing Bristol to Jesus is part of God's plan, which has always been, the salvation of the world.

Since Genesis Chapter 3, God's been in the business of saving the world. John 3:16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'. This verse has been made famous and made known because it is such a beautiful, simple explanation of the good news of the gospel.

Tim Keller, a man who really understood the gospel and did such a good job of explaining it, wrote this: 'If you live for your career and you don't do well, it may punish you all of your life, and you will feel like a failure. If you live for your children and they don't turn out all right, you could be absolutely in torment because you feel worthless as a person. If Jesus is your centre and Lord and you fail him, he will forgive you. Your career can't die for your sins... Whatever you base your life on - you have to live up to that. Jesus is the one Lord you can live for who died for you - who breathed his last breath for you.'

If you know this to be true, then Jesus is your one true home. Instinctively you know that he isn't just a home for you, He is the one true home for everyone. As CS Lewis said, if it is true, it can't just be true for one person, it has to be true for everyone.

Once we discover its truth for ourselves, there's a natural instinct to want others to discover it too.

The second most searched bible verse is Jeremiah 29:11, ' For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

People love that verse because it expresses what we know to be true, that our lives are not meaningless, they have a purpose. God has a plan for you.

As Christians we read the Old Testament through the lens of the person of Jesus and the work He accomplished at the Cross. So when we look at Jeremiah we don't just kind of lift that verse up and drop it where we are today and interpret it how we like. We look at the context, which, in this case, was a bunch of people living in exile in Babylon who weren't actually going through the easiest of times. This verse wasn't a promise that God would make life easy in Babylon, but a promise that God would give them meaning, purpose and hope in the face of the challenge of a new life in a different country, 500 miles away from home. We may not be living in exile but what it means for us is that through the work of the Cross and the person of Jesus, God has plans for us even in the challenges we face.

His plan for you is not to give you a really comfortable life and not to harm you and to make sure you're ok and you get the UK version of the American Dream. His plan for you is aligned with His plan for the world. He longs for you to play your part in the salvation of the world. Jesus has acted decisively and uniquely. Our job is simply to bring people to him. To do that He just wants us to understand that His plan for us is part of His plan for the whole world. His plan for you is part of his plan for the whole world.

When some friends heard about Jesus and the healing He was doing, they carried their paralysed friend to the house where Jesus was. Unable to reach him through the crowd,

they ripped the roof open and lowered their friend to Jesus. They brought their friend to Jesus. Jesus healed him and forgave him.

We're going to LOVE this city, by ripping the roof open, breaking down the barriers that keep people from Jesus, so that they might know His forgiveness.

Now, I know that His plans for me to help bring others to Jesus may ultimately result in my physical and emotional harm in the face of rejection and persecution, but I know that those plans will not harm my soul but will grow it. Our doctrine as a church has its genesis in a meeting that took place almost 1700 years ago when around 300 bishops met to clarify the identity of Jesus. Eye-witness accounts testify to many of those gathered bearing the scars of persecution which had only relatively recently stopped under the Roman Empire. If we want to craft ourselves a more comfortable cross, or a faith that avoids danger, then we've probably misunderstood what's happening at the cross. His life in exchange for ours, that we might go free. So when we come to faith, we give him ours in response.

A few weeks ago, when Wayne and I shared with some of our colleagues what we were planning to do over the next few weeks, Ron said 'If you talk about the Alpha Course in January, you'll get Alpha. But if you talk about Prayer, you'll get Prayer and Alpha'. It was his way of saying that this next phase of our journey needs to be birthed not in activism, but in prayer. In the last few weeks Wayne and I have just become convicted that we need to be praying more as a church.

If you consider yourself to be a part of this church, we want to encourage you to pray with others weekly for this vision, for the salvation of this city. When we pray, God breaks our hearts for what breaks His and we are prepared to face the world, its sin and the evil that lives in it. What we'd love is for there to be a grass roots prayer revolution here at B&A. We would love you to take the initiative, to pray, to pray with others and tell us when you're doing it, so that we can point others to join in with you.

Now I said I would come back to you, if you don't know what happens to you when you die. Your body will stay here, but your soul will come before God in judgement. You'll be asked to give an account of your life. Those who confessed that Jesus is Lord and believed in their hearts that God raised him from the dead will be saved and will enjoy eternal life in the new creation. In short hand if your answer to God begins with "I" rather than "he" you're in trouble. When we get there we'll point to the one who died in our place. Those who denied him will not, they will face eternal separation from God in Hell. What happens to those who never had the chance, we have to leave in the hands of God.

But God so loved the world that whoever believes in him does not have to perish, but can have eternal life. You can have eternal life. Anyone can have eternal life.