

O: The Observatory

O Israel, lift up your eyes to see what God is doing all around the world; then you will say, "Truly, the Lord's great power goes far beyond our boundaries." (Mal. 1:5 LB)

Two or three years ago we visited the Observatory in Greenwich with Jane Ware. This is the place from which time was until recently measured all across the world (GMT stands for Greenwich Mean Time, now known as Universal Time). King Charles II had the building built to study the stars with a view to developing the calculation of longitude, which would make proper navigation possible. All longitude is measured from this building. It was fascinating, too, to follow the history of precision time keeping devices.

Greenwich is no longer an active observatory, of course, because of light pollution over London, although there is a planetarium, in which dramatic pictures of stars and galaxies are projected onto the roof of the building.

I looked through a telescope at Greenwich because the placard encouraged me to take a look at Pluto. Closer inspection revealed an image of a well known cartoon character of that name. Oh well, you can't expect to make sensational observations every day!

We can imagine the original astronomers at the Observatory making numerous notes as they charted their stellar tables. We too will want to keep a note of what the Lord says to us. A few weeks ago He said to me 'Take a notepad to bed' - and that's when he gave me the ideas for this *Encounter* series.

God's nudges often prove far reaching- provided we trust and obey them. We have a friend who, when she was still single, looked at a house in Chester. The Lord told her clearly not to buy it because He was reserving it for a family. We turned out to be that family! For all sorts of reasons, her obedience released immense blessings even years down our path.

In this article I would like us to turn our attention to wider matters. Spiritually, this is perhaps somewhat more akin to looking at the heavens through a telescope rather than just looking over our city from a local viewpoint. Each of us has particular spiritual insights, and areas of spiritual responsibility - for example, for our place of work, or particular church or organisation. Let's make a start by dropping in on the prophet Habakkuk, who was having a decidedly bad day at the office.

When God says the unexpected

The prophet Habakkuk was in his observatory one day when he had a vigorous and profoundly disturbing conversation with the Lord. The conversation in the opening chapter of the book goes something like this.

Habakkuk: Lord, just look at what is going on in our midst. It's terrible! You're making me look at violence everywhere and you're not doing anything about it.

God: I am aware of all that, Habakkuk, and I am at work, but you wouldn't believe me if I told you what I was doing.

Habakkuk: Go on then, try me for size!

God: Ok. Stop looking at the violence around you and look at the nations instead. You will be utterly amazed.

Habakkuk: You mean You're going to bring strength and godliness back to our nation?

God: No, I'm raising up the Babylonians to be the scourge of My people.

Habakkuk: Oh no! Anything but that! That will mean violence on a scale undreamt of.

God: I told you that you wouldn't believe me. The wicked men who, you have seen are hemming in the righteous will themselves be hemmed in.

Habakkuk: Oh help!

Habakkuk reeled in shock, then steadied himself by affirming what he knew about God, before reaching a position of trust concerning what God was doing; that He would judge the Babylonians themselves for their actions, but only after He had judged His own people first. Right at the end, he came through to a position of praise and trust despite overwhelmingly testing circumstances.

I alluded to this principle in the last edition by quoting Merlin Carother's ground breaking books on praising God for the very things we are finding so hard. Have you tried it? Ros and I certainly felt shocked when we were told we had to leave our present property, at a time when Ros was in so much discomfort from a fractured ankle. A few weeks on, we are beginning to make sense of it - although there is going to be a lot of work involved!

Standing on our Watchtowers

Habakkuk's response to this entirely unwelcome revelation is to go up on his the ramparts of his watchtowers - his observatory if you like - and watch and listen to what the Lord had to say to him. The word 'watch',

mismeret, has a varied meaning, denoting either the duty or act of watching, or a place of observation where such a responsibility is fulfilled. We need both!

Each prophet in the Bible sees through rather different lenses. Haggai's message, and the way he communicates it, for example, is very different from Zechariah's, and yet both were addressing the same people at the same time. God uses how He has made us to move His purposes forward. Other prophets, such as Malachi, would find entirely different literary means to communicate the heart of the message God had given him.

Think of any subject you like you may be interested in, and, if you look at it from a spiritual perspective you will find God in it. This applies not just to Theology, the study of God, but to Anatomy, the study of the human body that the Lord has made so intricately, to Languages, the means by which we communicate with each other, to Music, which Heaven is so full of, to Art, for God is supremely an artist in all He creates, and so on through every other subject: Design, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Geography, History, which in so many ways is His Story, Maths – the more you study the perfect and highly complex structure of DNA, for example, the more you encounter God's perfect Intelligent Design, and so on.

Concerning "Emerging Church"

It is so important that we adjust your our lens onto the issues God has directed your attention to. From the watchtower of our spiritual observatory, we are able to turn sight into insight: not only to *observe* events but to perceive something of the true *meaning* of the way trends are developing – and what both God and the powers of darkness alike are doing through them.

Just as astronomers need time to examine the heavens, may the Lord help us to focus on the specific projects we are involved in, *and* to ponder where these wider trends are leading. There is enormous pressure being brought to bear on the way modern Christians think and express their faith. There is so much that is good that is coming through in the way people are expressing church, but also a great deal that risks being superficial – or even downright misleading.

As Richard Williamson wrote to me this morning when I was discussing this matter with him,

Making the church more appealing to people today is admirable, but throwing out the basics of doctrine, faith and practice in order to achieve

this is most definitely NOT admirable. I'm convinced that we must show the distinctives of our faith – the 'otherness' of God in all that we do and in the way that we live, rather than trying to present an appealing 'just like you' gospel which irons out all that is distinctive about our faith in order to make it completely palatable.

What concerns me most with the emerging Church is that the disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, worship and accountability all risk being replaced by a 'spirituality' that avoids making firm decisions. In this new spirituality it is fine to ask lots of questions, have cosy chats over coffee and doughnuts, but affords no place for absolute truth or challenging discipleship.

No longer is it acceptable to state beliefs that are clearly in Scripture because such statements offend the new morality [influenced as it is by Political Correctness] which labels such declared beliefs as bigoted, judgemental and dangerous. We can see this so clearly in the way society is developing today, that if certain beliefs are stated, there is a real danger of being hauled before the courts, losing your job and facing vilification.

In some parts of the church similar accusations are being made about 'the fundamentalists'. Whilst I agree that there are some awful examples of 'fundamentalism' about, which I would certainly not want to associate myself with, it seems that even holding the basic credal statements of belief that have been thought out and handed down to us over the centuries is now being labelled in such ways.

By all means we should seek to provide opportunities for honest questioning, and put on appealing events - but we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater in order to achieve this. Deep down in people's hearts I believe people want something solid to stand on when everything around them in terms of lifestyle and morality is like shifting sand. Providing more of what the world is already offering is *not* going to help them achieve this.

Pray for people – especially those under 35 – to have an intense hunger for God Himself and His Word; and to refuse neatly packaged siren songs, that divert them into replacement theology, the cult of entertainment and so many other traps, and to enter into Holy Spirit sharpness. To achieve real Christ-centredness means rejecting the delusion that we become more relevant by downplaying Christ!

In all this we have a sure starting point: that the Lord *wants* to confide in us (Ps. 25:14), and to take us into His confidence (Pvbs 3:32). Jesus said to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion,

“You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones.” (Luke 22:28-30)

There is no lack of willingness on His part. Our part is to align ourselves, heart and will, with Him.

This is true of both ‘small’ things, international affairs and everything in between. Just as God is ‘in’ all the subjects we considered earlier – and more besides – so He has a true perspective on *everything* in life – not just church related matters.

It is worth remembering, however, why the observatory had to move away from Greenwich. Light pollution over the city meant that the great telescopes had to relocate to much more remote regions. As surely as we must be open to the Lord pointing out the ‘interference and clutter’ in our own ability to receive what the Lord is saying, it is important realize that when people at the centre who are not biblically based begin to tack on extra elements, then the wings of the church are going to become dangerously unbalanced.

Those who have studied the lives of the prophets will be well aware that there is also a cost to seeing such things clearly. John and Paula Sandford remind us that a true prophet of God will often be repenting when the Body of Christ is rejoicing, for they will see what is superficial or missing. Conversely, they will be rejoicing when the Body is repenting, for it means that they are waking up to dimensions they are missing out on, or on what they could be doing much more creatively.

A Message for our Times

The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the Lord of Heaven's Armies. But you priests have left God's paths. Your instructions have caused many to stumble into sin . . . So I have made you despised and humiliated in the eyes of all the people. For you have not obeyed me but have shown favoritism in the way you carry out My instructions.” (Mal. 2:7-9 NLT)

God endorses and works through all genuine leadings of His Spirit – but only if they point to Jesus, and do not deny the central tenets of the

Christian faith. God cannot and will not own that which embraces elements of New Age or Hindu based meditative practices, all of which water down and compromise the Word of God, and presents others as being equal to the Lord Jesus. John 14:6 continues to be a litmus test for the Church in our relativist age.

When senior church leaders deny that Jesus died on the Cross for our sins, or that hell is a reality, we are well on the way to casting loose our moorings and developing a church of our own devising that neither Jesus nor Paul would recognise.

To repeat my earlier concern:

Lord, may many people in this land, especially those you have already awakened, develop such an intense hunger for You and Your word that they will not fall prey to neatly packaged siren songs but develop a life of real Christ-centredness and Holy Spirit led fruitfulness.

With our love,

Robert & Rosalind

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