

COUNTY CHURCH - A PANORAMIC VIEW

Genesis 13v14-17

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Lift up your eyes from where you are, and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever.”

This is the highest point in Judea & Samaria. Today, you can't stand where Abram stood because it is an Israeli military base and there is a radar station on the exact spot. That tells you all you need to know about the strategic importance of this vantage point. It is Har Ba'al Hazor, and the locals refer to the radar station as “the eyes of Father Abraham.” From the summit, to the north you can see Damascus (Syria), to the south the Negev desert, to the east Amman (Jordan) and to the west Tel Aviv. What a vantage point. What a panoramic view.

And what a promise! **“Lift up your eyes from where you are, and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.”** I can imagine that this was one of Abram's favourite places to visit.

There are some views you never tire of. It is not enough to have seen them once - you need to revisit them again and again. Maybe it is a favourite holiday spot or some place of special significance. You love to revisit such places.

It is the same with this text in Genesis 13. I've often returned to it. God has used it from time to time to get me to stop and take stock. In fact I preached from it exactly five years ago at Longhirst Hall reviewing our first few years in the County. I want to revisit it today.

But first take a look at Abram. Where is he as God tells him to lift up his eyes from where he is? God had set Abram on a journey of faith to leave the sophistication and comfort of Ur of the Chaldeas not knowing where it would take him. (Hebrews 11v8) The journey stalled at Haran until God kick-started him again with some extraordinary promises. (Gen.12:1-4) This brought Abram to the land of Canaan, stopping first at Shechem and then Bethel. After that he took a wrong turn, journeying down to Egypt before returning with his tail between his legs. Now he has come again to Bethel in Canaan. He has just parted company from his nephew, Lot, when God speaks to him saying, **“Lift up your eyes from where you are.”**

But what about us? Where are *we* in our journey? To look, like Abram, from where you are, you need to know how far you have come.

There are plenty of good reasons for taking a look back.

1. We are quick to forget; we need to keep thanking God for bringing us this far.
2. It reminds us what is involved in planting a church from scratch.
3. It is encouraging to review the variety of ways we have been active.
4. It helps those who have joined us more recently to know some of this history.
5. It helps all of us to see the big picture and not just the specific ministries we are involved with.
6. Looking back is not just a trip down memory lane it explains who we are, and where we are now.
7. We haven't done this for five years, so it is not too self-indulgent!

So let's lift up our eyes from where we are; it's time for a brief look over our shoulder.

1. Looking back

I'll start in 2002. When it became clear that Liz and I should move on from south east London God began to put faith in our hearts for church planting in Northumberland. We had more prophetic confirmation about this than at any other time in our lives. We spoke to Dennis and Kay who very quickly agreed to come with us. Then Alistair and also Gordon & Carol said they would also come with us. I was offered funding support by *newfrontiers* for the first 18 months. So we moved north in September 2003. It is because of this that I tend to think of September as the beginning of a new church year, hence choosing today for this review.

First Year: 2003/04.

We found a few people already in Northumberland we were up for it! During that first year we met on Sundays with City Church Newcastle, going into one of their rooms during the preaching twice a month with the little group we were gathering. I recall "living with" a text throughout this year – Matthew 9v37: *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

We also met in homes in the county each week for prayer averaging 20 people over the two evenings. We got a web site up and running and held a residential weekend at Otterburn in April 2004 for those who were considering relocating. There were 56 present. At this weekend we laid out our vision and explained how God had given us faith for multiple church planting.

By May we had three groups meeting, in Ponteland, Wansbeck and Morpeth and households in 11 locations in the county. In this first year we spent time

connecting with other church leaders in the county and also with those who thinking of relocating to join us. This involved trips to the airport, offering hospitality, driving people around the county and to interviews. It involved decorating houses for sale and cleaning houses being moved into. By the end of that first year Liz and I had moved three times and lived in four homes.

Second Year: 2004/05.

In September 2004 we began meeting on Sunday evenings in Northumberland at Longhirst Hall just north of Morpeth. Our main preaching and teaching emphasis was on Jesus in John's Gospel. Behind this was the conviction that if we want to establish a solid foundation for church, then Jesus must be our focus.

In this very earliest stage some expressed commitment by moving house specifically to join us – with all that means in terms of finances, difficulty in selling and buying, children's schooling, jobs, leaving family or friends and previous churches. For some it meant moving from a place they had lived all their life to an area they had never even visited. By September 2004 most of those who had planned to relocate in this first wave had done so. From the outset we encouraged them to move to different towns and localities in the county rather than all head for the same place. We were looking for homes to be strategic bridgeheads for the gospel, each one a potential cell group or maybe even a church.

In January 2005 we took two dozen people through our first Foundations Course. In April we changed to meeting in the morning to encourage families to come. This was earlier than we expected, largely because of provocation from seven year old Matthew Oxley. For five days in June 05 a *newfrontiers* 'Let's Go' Team helped us with local evangelism and we followed this up with our first *Alpha* at a pub in Bedlington with four guests on the course. We were now "out there" sharing the gospel and getting *Alpha* into our bloodstream.

We had excellent support from the other *newfrontiers* churches in the northern region. Because we had no musicians at that time, City Church Newcastle provided us with worship leaders each week. We received a financial gift from the NORTH regional weekend and City Church had a Gift Day from which we received another substantial gift. And all along Ian Galloway was alongside us, supporting and encouraging.

Third Year: 2005/06.

By September 2005 our nucleus was around 30 adults and 10 children. Some people had come among us for a time and then decided this was not for them. We were a group of committed pioneers with just about everyone serving in

some way. We were establishing foundations. The strength of your foundations determines what can be built in the future. Now we are twice that number, but still stretched to the limit. There are no passengers when you are this size. This is a battleship not a luxury liner – a very small battleship admittedly!

We had two home *Alphas* in Ponteland. One of the first to come to faith was Lynn's mother Dorothy. Mark and Gail launched our youth group, Level X with Lauren and Hayley. In March 2006 we moved our Sunday morning meeting from Longhirst Hall to Bedlington and in May we began to meet for prayer once a month on Sunday evenings in the Aln Valley to see what God might open up for us there. In July we were joined by Larry and Lorna. Larry had been an evangelist on staff in another *newfrontiers* church in Hook, Hants; we were able to support him part time.

Fourth Year: 2006/07.

We had our biggest Sunday congregation at the Community Centre in December at our Christmas Nativity with over 100 people present including 42 guests. County Church Wansbeck, with 47 church members, was launched on 21st January 2007 and in April Dennis and I were appointed as elders. Dennis, in particular, had worked hard at getting our finances set up (before passing it on to Gordon), chairing Trustees, negotiating Charity status, developing a Child Protection Policy and arranging our membership of the Evangelical Alliance.

We now had five cell groups and the youth group meeting mid week. Our first County Church baptisms were in July; seven people, ranging in age from 12 to 74, were baptised and 92 people were present, using the baptistery of the nearby URC church.

At long last we had some musicians of our own, enough to develop several small worship teams. We started an Aln Valley cell group with a nucleus of three families. We also put on a Holiday Club in Shilbottle in April and on the back of this launched a fortnightly 'Kidz Klub'. We put on a series of "special" events to invite friends to – the first being a Jazz evening at a bar in Bedlington.

It was also at this time that level X did their exciting Malawi project with each young person having £10 to multiply; it culminated in their first Fashion Show and Auction which raised £1,500 and funded a national youth workers conference in Malawi.

Fifth Year: 2007/08.

We had further home *Alphas* in Darras Hall and Hadston. Dave & Rosie

Fellingham from Brighton joined us for a Church weekend and we connected with a team in Norfolk led by Maurice Nightingale; they have a similar vision for church planting in a largely rural area. Over 17 years they had seen 10 churches established. We also gave financial support to Julian Adams for twelve months as he relocated from South Africa to the UK to work alongside Jeremy in Teesside.

Our work in the Aln Valley was encouraging with the Kidz Klub now well established and good links made with several families. Two of our young people made professions of faith at the annual *newfrontiers New Day* summer camp. We had some additions to the church by people relocating to the area, but little growth by salvation.

Sixth year: 2008/09:

In September '08 our '*Compassion*' Sunday resulted in twelve families becoming personal sponsors of children in different nations. In December we had a Flood Relief Gift Day to help local people following the devastating floods in the area. We had another two home Alphas during the year and 3 people baptised, one of whom invited 16 of her friends as guests. We began a monthly Sunday afternoon meeting in the Aln Valley in June 09.

Our youth group had grown in numbers and strength, now under Larry's vigorous leadership. The whole group went to the *New Day* camp near Norwich and Luke and Lauren went on summer teams to Porto & Valencia, while Sophie went to Malawi to work with children and young people. We had a magnificent gift day to help each of these with the finance for their trips and to fund Dan Lee for a year of Training with us from September 2009.

We began to have big prayer battles with a variety of serious health issues as well as the impact of the recession (redundancies and businesses hit hard). We launched a twice monthly church prayer meeting. We even began to resource other church planting ventures when Jon & Jenne Pape moved to Huddersfield.

Seventh year: 2009/10:

This past year Dan Lee became our first Year teamer, working with young people and getting wide experience of church life and leadership. 2010 started, not just with thick snow, but with a series of five evenings when we joined with New Life Morpeth for a Bible School. In January we also had a special Gift Day following the disaster in Haiti and you gave £1,500, which was sent via *Compassion*. At the end of April *Level X* put on a second Fashion show and Auction also raising funds for Haiti.

In March we launched our new initiative in Bedlington, the *Community Help Hub* where we offer free PC and landline facilities to those seeking work or accessing benefits. A Gift Day towards the cost of launching this raised £5,200. We are currently meeting something like 20 to 30 local people each week in the Hub.

We have had two further home Alphas during the year led by Dennis & Kay and Larry and Lorna and our Darras Hall group had post Alpha, going through John's Gospel. In a cost cutting exercise Northumberland County Council decided to close the Community Centre, so in June 2010 we relocated to the Welfare Hall in Stakeford.

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Let's keep thanking God for what he has done in these early years and for bringing us this far. So much for looking over our shoulder; next we need to look into the future.

2. Looking ahead

We cannot look too far into the future; there are too many unknowns and unpredictable's. But the real reason we can't plan too far ahead is because God is Sovereign. He is in charge! This local church, like the church worldwide, is Christ's not ours. If Jesus wants to turn everything around and spoil our best plans He has every right. We are in His hands.

But this doesn't mean we simply drift into the future. It doesn't mean we just react to circumstances as we go along. In fact we are given plenty of help to move ahead. Our text in Genesis 13 gives us some big keys.

God gives us vision (v14)

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are, and look north and south, east and west."

God was saying to Abram, *This is why I called you to leave Ur. This is what I have called you to.*"

So what has God called us to? What has he put in our hearts? We are clear about our *mission* - like every other company of believers, it is to preach the gospel and make disciples. We know that our specific *assignment* is here in Northumberland. But what is our vision?

Our *vision* is to plant churches. This is much more than gathering a crowd. We believe a church is a community of believers who are being built together, their lives joined together: with loving relationships, accountability, commitment and a sense of being on a mission together - companies of

people who are worshippers, passionate about Jesus Christ, enjoying the Holy Spirit, building their lives on the truth of God's Word, living out the gospel in our communities.

In fact, next Sunday we will start a new teaching series on this theme thinking about the kind of churches God wants to establish and what Biblical values are of first importance. We will start with being a people with Good News to share. This is the vision God has given us.

And, as if establishing *one* church was not scary enough, very early God gave us faith for *multiple* church planting. He began to give us a county wide vision. Some of us remember Lynn's prayer at Ellington when there was only a handful of us, thanking God for this "*ludicrously big vision*".

Around the time that I announced to the church in south London that I was leaving and coming up to Northumberland someone came to me feeling that God had something to say to me. They had just seen a TV documentary, presented by Charlie Dimmock, about the launching of the Alnwick Garden project. This had featured a huge tower crane used for clearing, lifting and putting underground pipes in position. God wanted to say to me that, just as this crane was being used "to change the landscape" so too, this would happen in Northumberland through church planting. From that time a phrase began to ring in my ears and stir my heart. It was "*Changing the landscape by planting churches.*" I have here the first brochure the Alnwick Garden project produced; on the cover is that huge tower crane and the words "*Alnwick Garden – a vision.*"

God is saying to us what He said to Abram: "look north and south, east and west." By faith see the landscape changing as more and more Spirit-filled churches appear. This is why we are here in Northumberland.

This is a big vision. This is something to stir faith in us. And it is what our giving is all about. In the letter I've written to everyone today this is what I'm trying to get across. "*God has caught us up in a great adventure here in Northumberland and sacrificial giving is part and parcel of the adventure! Our giving is not just to keep the wheels on the road it is giving to a mission and a vision.*"

God gives us promises (v15)

It was God's great promises to Abram which sustained him in his lifetime. On this occasion the promise was: **All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.** Abraham had this mighty promise but we have *a Bible full!* There is so much in God's word to give us strength and faith and courage and guidance as we move forward.

Some of you might have had a Bible Promise Box. I recall one in my home as a boy; the Bible promises were rolled up and squeezed into a round box and you needed tweezers to select a promise. This morning I only have time to pick out a few of the big promises Jesus made, each one vital for our mission as a church.

- Jesus promised: **I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.** (Mtth. 16v18) This isn't saying the church will survive against all the odds when it is attacked; it is saying that nothing (not even hell itself) will be able to withstand the growth and advance of the church of Jesus Christ.
- Jesus promised: **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.** (Acts 1v8) If we are to make any significant progress it will be the result of the Spirit's power at work in us.
- Jesus promised: **"ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete"**. (John 16v24) God loves us to ask him to do their things only He can do. We are not to depend on techniques or success formulas or personality or influence. We are to pray! This Friday we have one our Evenings of Prayer at Ulgham starting at 7.30 pm.
- Jesus promised **"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"** - as we go out on mission and make disciples among every people group.

So the Bible gives us plenty of rich promises.

But local churches can also build on *prophetic promises*. In fact we should expect God to speak to us specifically about how he wants us to build church. For instance, in the earliest days of our church in Brighton God spoke through a prophetic picture of a large oak tree. He wanted them to build something big and visible in the town. Meanwhile at Biggin Hill, God was saying to the church there that he wanted them to keep giving people away to start other churches, and that they would have an influence out of all proportion to their size. A very different prophetic direction! In both cases this is not simply "what happened" – it actually shaped their strategy.

So what about us? Has God said anything to us which gives us prophetic roots in our church planting ? Some of you have fed back to me some that have stood out for you in our early years; the Aln Valley group came back with a nine that were particularly living with them. In terms of the mission God has given us overall in the county let me mention a couple which have stood out.

- 2006: A strawberry plant with the mother plant sending out runners across

the ground bearing fruit in different places; some, not all, taking root strongly and becoming mother plants – and then, themselves, continuing the process of spreading out over yet more ground. i.e. God was speaking to us about horizontal growth in many places rather than vertical growth in one place.

- 2009: God is building something with strong pillars. The first has already been set in place. But God's design had five more slots at foundation level. (This prophetic picture came complete with a drawing – showing the distinctive Bedlington pillar in the square opposite the Community Centre.)
- A few months later, as we were praying about finding premises for the Help Hub: *"My bride should be captivating... God is restoring the church's supernatural beauty. It is God who will clothe her and make her radiant."* Then we discovered *"J.C.'s Bridal Boutique"*!

God gives us children (v16)

As a boy I had a reoccurring dream – the kind you wake up in a cold sweat over. As my mother opened my bedroom curtains I would wake up saying, *"I can't do it! I can't do it!"* She would say, *"What can't you do son?"* *"I can't count the sand on the beach!"* Yes, it is an impossibility! God used the same idea when speaking to Abram. **I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.**

"Offspring" – children, *mean there is a future.* God was speaking to Abram about the generations after him. This wasn't simply about him and his lifetime; it was about the future beyond him. In the same way, this is a long term vision God has given us. *But for there to be a future we need God to give us children!*

- We want spiritual children. New Christians. Our mission is to tell people the good news of Jesus. This is why we run *Alpha* courses. We want children - new baby Christians we can nurture and see grow as disciples. *If this church is to have a future we need new believers.* This is also why we run Kidz Klub in Shilbottle. It is why youth work is so important. Most Christians come to faith in their early years.
- But we also want actual offspring! Next Sunday we are celebrating the arrival of baby Max with Mark and Gail. They will be dedicating themselves to bringing Max up in "the discipline and nurture of the Lord" in a Christian home. This is such a priority. Our Sunday mornings *Bubbles* (0-5's) and *County Kids* (6-11's) is to *supplement* what Christian parents do in the home.

So we must look ahead beyond ourselves and pass on the baton for others to

run on ahead. This means identifying those with the gift of leadership. This is something constantly in our thoughts as leaders for every level of church life. There is skill involved in passing on the baton, as we know very well from our British relay teams at big athletic championships.

Abram received God's call and began the journey but he didn't see the promises fulfilled in his lifetime. When he died he could still count his offspring. But he wouldn't be able to do that now. Changing the landscape doesn't happen overnight. It took many years before the young trees planted in Kielder at the beginning of the 20th century began changed the landscape of Northumberland.

God gives us instructions to "Go!" (v17)

God instructed Abram to start walking. **Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.**" Abram might have thought that because Bethel was the place where God had met with him he should settle down there. But God said "Go!" He started him moving again on his journey of faith.

We have received a Great Commission to "go" not to stay and hope people come to us. Mission is going where others are with the Good News of Jesus Christ: making disciples, doing acts of loving service. Jesus "went through all the towns and villages" of Galilee. Mission means "going" and keeping on the move - not settling for a little success.

But I need to say something here. For you and me 'going' does not always mean constantly relocating. You can stay in one place all your life and still be "going"! Indeed we need people who will stay. We need "pillars" in the church who will bring stability as well as "arrows" to shoot out. You might never move house but when you ask the question, "*How can I get something moving?*" – you are "going"! It might be in your street, among your circle of friends, in your town. When you start doing something you are taking steps of mission. Even if it flops!

So, what is God telling us as a church to do in the immediate future? What are the next steps we need to take?

A New Village Hall is opening in Shilbottle today – and we will be using this for Kidz Klub and our new style Sunday monthly afternoon meetings; the Aln Valley group also plan to have some of their mid-week meetings in the new Hall with a view to inviting local people to join them. We will also be putting on the Christmas Musical again, which was so affected by snow last year.

Here in Wansbeck we are looking for the Hub to go on from strength to strength and we will start to use the rooms upstairs. We have a new home

Alpha starting in Ponteland this week and we would like to have another in Wansbeck.

But what about our Sunday base? What about where we meet? We've been here in Stakeford since the end of June because Northumberland County Council indicated they were closing the Community Centre in Bedlington.

Most of us would say that the facilities here at the Welfare Hall are superior. It is better maintained, has been modernised, has no stairs and it has better rooms for children. If it was a vote between facilities at Bedlington C.C. and Stakeford Welfare, it would be no-contest.

But from a *strategic* point of view Bedlington will not go away!

- A town centre is a more appropriate location for the "mother" church as we plant more churches in the county; and prophetically - the first "pillar" was the distinctive Bedlington market place pillar.
- Bedlington is an excellent centre of gravity for Wansbeck
- Through the opening of the Community Help Hub in Bedlington we now have a more public profile in the town, and we have an opportunity to play a part in the regeneration of the town.
- Every week our Help Hub team are meeting local Bedlington people; to be able to invite them to the Community Centre over the road would be so much easier than to Stakeford.
- Until recently our strategy in Wansbeck lacked a specific geographic focus. We now have one in Bedlington.

So as elders, we believe our time in Stakeford will be a temporary one. But what is the position as far as the Community Centre is concerned?

- The town council are taking it on
- They are keen to have us back and have said so in "*the Journal*" this week!
- We are currently renegotiating with them
- Our hope is that we will return to the Community Centre in the new year
- We would like to start afresh with a Carol Service there on December 18th, inviting those who come into the Help Hub.

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In everything we do as a church, as we move ahead, we want to be led by the Spirit. So while it is right to develop strategies and make plans, let's be open to the fresh wind of the Spirit blowing in our sails, sometimes accelerating our progress while at other times taking us in a new direction.

John Wilthew. September 2010