



## Notes

### Vision Sunday 2016

By Leston Blackburn

*Text: Isaiah 43:16-21*

*16 This is what the Lord says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, 17 who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: 18 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. 19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. 20 The wild animals honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, 21 the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.*

#### Introduction

Who is excited about the year ahead? We are fast approaching a very momentous moment in the history of our local church. In fact, it is a moment that has only happened once before in the almost 47 years of MEC's existence – and you are part of this moment!

In just a few short weeks' time, we will take possession of our brand new church building, and I don't know if you recall this or not, but it is a process that started more than 5 years ago. It hasn't always been an easy journey, but then no journey that is worthwhile ever is. God always has, as part of His

plan, a desire to forge the character of Christ in us, and that comes through challenging times as well as peaceful ones.

There were people who, understandably, felt a bit cautious, perhaps even sceptical about whether the project would ever get off the ground, and that is because there had been some false starts in the past.

So I suppose there was a sense in which some may have felt a little like the Israelites standing on the shore of the Red Sea wondering how on earth the waters were ever going to part in the first place, all while the Egyptian army was closing in behind. Perhaps you can relate to the opening text this morning which speaks about God making a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters – it's always easier to see it in hindsight! So, understandably, some felt a little overwhelmed by the prospect of ever venturing out in faith as far as a building project was concerned at least.

Of course, we were also in the grip of one of the greatest economic slumps in recorded history (I think it is fair to say that God really did provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, wouldn't you agree?!)

And so we called the church together, if you recall, a little over 5 years ago now, and set aside a week of prayer and fasting, waiting on the Lord to collectively discern whether this really was His will for us. Can anyone remember huddling together in the portacabin?

It was during this week of prayer that we collectively sensed God saying, "Go for it! I'm with you!" We received a Scripture during this time too. Can anyone remember what it was? I'll put you out of your misery; it was Isaiah 54:2-4, and it reads:

*Isaiah 54: 2-5 - 2 "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. 3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will*

*dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. 4 “Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated...*

There was a very real sense in which God was saying, “Forget the past. Don’t dwell on the false starts. I am going to do a new thing!” And so we adopted our ETT slogan from this very passage of Scripture - *Extending the Tent* – set, sail, and ventured out in faith (and a little trepidation).

Well, guess what? We are now just weeks away, just days away, really, from seeing the fulfilment of a promise God gave to us more than 5 years ago - and this during a time that has seen one of the greatest world-wide economic slumps in recorded history! I believe God’s hand has been on us, folks, and we give **all** the praise, **all** the honour and **all** the glory to the Lord!

While the praise, glory and honour belongs to the Lord, I want to say a very big thank you to you for getting on board! I know it wasn’t easy to take such a big leap of faith, but it’s a leap that makes possible what God is about to do, so thank you for your courage!

I want to say a huge thank you too for your patience, your faithfulness and your commitment over the last year, particularly since we have had to meet off-site on a Sunday afternoon and haven’t been able to run many of our mid-week activities. I don’t say this lightly – we have some of the finest people in our community here at MEC, and it is an honour to be your pastor.

And now, as we are about to occupy God’s promise, I hear the Lord saying once again, “*See, I am doing a new thing! **Now** it springs up; **do you not perceive it?** I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*”

I am particularly excited as we approach this brand new season because I not only have a real sense of gratitude for what God has done over the last 5 years, but a real sense of anticipation about what He is about to do over the next 5 years and beyond! You see, God hasn’t led us to extend the tent

without a clear purpose in mind. Not only did His promise include extending the tent, it also included extending our descendants!

The dream God birthed more than 5 years ago is about to be realised, friends, and with it, the dream He has for the next 5 years too!

Here are some slides of the progress so on the building project so far (taken about a month ago). We are due to be back on site some time in February!

So with this in mind, let's reflect on our opening text together: **(See Isaiah 43:16-21)**.

God reaches out to the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah and paints a picture of a new tomorrow. However, he does so in a time when the future was anything but certain. As Dr Allen Ross so eloquently puts it, when Isaiah brings God's message to Judah,

“The northern kingdom of Israel had been carried into captivity (722 B.C.), and the kingdom of Judah was in the middle of idolatry and evil. The kingdom of Assyria had dominated the Fertile Crescent and posed a major threat to both kingdoms; and the kingdom of Babylon was gaining power and would replace Assyria as the dominant threat. In view of the fast-changing international scene, the people of Israel would be concerned about their lot in life—what would become of the promises of God? How could the chosen people survive, let alone be a theocracy again, and must the remnant of the righteous also suffer with the nation that, for all purposes, was pagan?”<sup>ii</sup>

But in the midst of what seemed a hopeless end, God was helping Judah to realise that He is our endless hope. God was helping the Israelites to glimpse, even in the midst of their despair, a future that was sure and secure in Him, and even though the tide was turning very much against them at the time,

God was still in control, He was still orchestrating history to ultimately bring about His will and purpose.

God was reminding them that He was bigger than their past. Their failures were no match for His faithfulness. God would not define them by their past failures.

*18 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past."*

God was also reminding them that He was bigger than their present. Even though things were getting dark and even though it would get darker still, God was busy orchestrating events in the present with the future in mind.

*19 See, I am doing a new thing! **Now** it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

I really feel God wants to say today that no matter how this message finds you, no matter what personal pains or struggles you face that have already broken about you, God is here! His grace is bigger than our past. His glory invades our present, and His purposes are already being forged for the future!

Since God is not bound by time, as we see in the example of Judah, He is already where we are yet to journey, and even now He is preparing the new in anticipation of what awaits us in the future!

So then, let's take a moment to see what is in store for the year ahead.

### 1. Return on-site

We are due back on site in the next few weeks. We will occupy a building that will be carpeted, painted, and pretty much ready to go for the most part. We will have to retrofit the Audio Visual system, the kitchen and attend to a few other odds and ends, but in the main, we will be ready to hit the ground running so to speak.

So, in preparation for the brand new start God has promised us;

## 2. Our brand new web site launches officially today.

And it has a new home! The web address is changing slightly, so if you have a pen, make a note. It is [www.mecmalvern.org](http://www.mecmalvern.org) (no longer the domain *.org.uk* but simply *.org*). We will be sure to put the new link onto the old website and keep that link active for the next while until everyone is used to migrating across.

So then, what have we done to the new site? Well, we've redesigned it from scratch. We've been doing quite a bit of research and had a look at how church website and other sites have developed over the last few years and have taken this on board.

Subsequently our new home page is designed like a landing page.

As you scroll down, you will see that we have our **mission statement** on the front page (and we've tried to remove the Christian jargon so that it is easy to understand). It reads: *We have a heart to see people empowered through a life-transforming relationship with God, encouraged through the support of a diverse Christian family and equipped to make a difference.*

**But what we've also aimed to do is utilise the website not only to inform, but to be a ministry tool. And this is where it gets exciting.**

For example, there is a section further down the home page (or landing page) called *Transforming Lives*. It reads...

*God is transforming people's lives by the power of His love. Listen to real-life stories of what God is doing in and through people at MEC.*

It provides a link to a page that tells stories about what God is doing in and through people at MEC – that’s you! There are two videos uploaded at the moment (more will follow in due course). The first is the Rainbow Club video (which we watched a few weeks ago) telling about how people at MEC are reaching out and serving the community through the Rainbow Club Parents and Toddlers group. There is also a video about the *Better English Internationals Community Group* and how they are serving the internationals in our community and beyond by giving free English lessons as a means both to help them and to help them assimilate and feel valued. But that is just the start. We will put other videos up in due course, including Coffee and Chat, for example if they are happy with that.

And this is where I need your help. I would dearly love for us to share more testimonies about what God has done and is doing in our lives because it is a great opportunity to help others to see that God is real and makes a real difference in people’s lives. I’m looking for the brave souls among us who are willing to share your testimony by way of an article or even a video which we can post online (and possibly share at on a Sunday too) as a ministry tool to enable God to begin to work in the hearts and lives of others! So after the service, we will form an orderly queue and before you get a cup of tea... no seriously – if you would be willing to share your story, there is a link you can click on and an email will come through to us. Let’s make a difference in the lives of others, folks!

Moving on, there are the usual links telling people about what is happening at MEC during the week.

But another addition to the website, and something we want to encourage more now that we will soon have a regular venue to meet in again, is time we can spend together in prayer.

There are two links on the website giving people an opportunity to learn a bit more about prayer as well as emailing any prayer requests they may have to

us so that we can stand with them in prayer. If you have any prayer requests, please do feel free to utilise this resource.

**When we are back on-site, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, we are going to be meeting on Sunday evenings for a time of Prayer and Worship. We're going to call it Open to God, and that, in the main, is what we are going to do – learn to be open to God. It is going to be a time of worship, of intercession, of sharing as the Spirit leads, and of waiting together as we seek God in an intentional and meaningful way. So please do make a note of that and I would encourage you to come along.**

Speaking of ministry resources, there is also a section on the website called *Resources*, and that in turn has a link called 'Grow.' It has various resource materials available including information on how to become a Christian (and help on how to share your testimony), a link to download a Bible Study App called *YouVersion* where you can set daily reading plans, listen to the Bible online while you read, send devotionals via email and a whole host of options. We can even sign up to study books of the Bible together, which is great.

There is also information about baptism, a link to our online Spiritual Gifts Survey, so if you haven't had a chance to complete it yet, please feel free to do so. Incidentally, when you do, you get a written summary of your main spiritual gifts emailed straight to you, so it really is worthwhile doing.

Another exciting initiative that launches this year is the School of Ministry.

### **School of Ministry**

School of Ministry is a training class that meets one evening a week during school terms from 7.30pm to around 8.45/9.00pm on a Wednesday evening starting in March (exact dates to be confirmed). It is a two-year programme that you can dip into and out of at any time (there is no charge) and covers various topics designed to help you in your walk with the Lord as well as prepare you for different practical aspects of life and ministry.



The curriculum for the first year-and-a-half is already uploaded on the website, so do take a moment to check it out when you get a chance, and if it is something you feel the Lord is leading you to get involved with, please do feel free to register your interest online. We will be exploring topics such as Walking by the Spirit; what it means and how we do it, Keys to Hearing God's Voice, Developing an Effective Prayer Life, Understanding the Bible, Effective Preaching, Sharing our Faith with Others, Experiencing God Together (Leading a Small Group), The Ministry Discovery Workshop and Building Authentic Relationships.

If you are interested or you know of someone who is interested, there is a link available on the website to register your interest.

**Let's take a look at some of the Upcoming events planned for the year.**

### **Upcoming Events**

**FEB 20 2016** - One Day Youth Event.

**SAT, MAR 5 2016 AT 6pm** – The Official Opening of New Church Facilities with guest speaker Simon Ponsonby. We are really blessed to have Simon as our guest speaker. He is a renowned author, pastor and national speaker and is often asked to preach at the New Wine annual and regional conferences.

The New Wine website describes Simon as follows:

“Simon is Pastor of Theology at St Aldates Oxford, where he wears several hats, all too big for him. When not teaching Scandinavian ordinands from Wycliffe Hall or lengthy sermons series at Aldates, he travels widely as a conference speaker focused on renewal and the spiritual life, and has written several books on practical theology and doctrine. His latest book is an expository commentary on Romans called God is for Us.”<sup>iii</sup>

**MAR 19 2016** – Revolutionise Your Devotional Life

Join us on Saturday Mar 19th for a one-day training event called Revolutionise Your Devotional Life with Andy Peck.

Andy is a Christian communicator, author, broadcaster and Bible teacher whose ministry has included time as a Bible teacher in a pastoral role in three churches in the south of England; as a coach and mentor with university students; as a writer and editor for Christianity magazine; and since 2006 as a Bible teacher and trainer at CWR, a charity that aims to help apply God's truth in everyday life and relationships.

In 2005 he created The Leadership File, a radio show designed to help Christian leaders in the church, charity and commercial sectors to develop character, skills and vision to better serve God. He also hosts a weekly broadcast on Premier Christian Radio.

Andy is going to lead two Saturday workshops at MEC which we want to open up not only to our church, but to all the churches at Malvern and surrounds.

On Saturday March the 19th we will be hosting Andy who will be leading a one-day training event called Revolutionise Your Devotional Life.

Topics in March will include:

- How to want to have devotions
- How to spend the time
- Tackling personal barriers
- What we expect of God
- How to hear God's voice
- Making a plan for change

Then later in the year, on Saturday September the 17th Andy will be returning to MEC to lead another training day called *Refreshing Your Spiritual Life* which will look at how to refresh our spiritual lives, have a deeper relationship and a more consistent walk with God.

Bookings can be made directly from CWR's website, and we will give more details in due course.

### **APR 16 2016 – Prayer Ministry Team Training Course**

The Prayer Ministry Training Course is for anyone who wants to learn how to give and receive in this crucial area of ministry. The course was developed at Holy Trinity Brompton to train leaders and members to pray for people in a home and church environment. The course consists of 3 talks presented on DVD by Rev Sandy Miller (predecessor to Nick Gumbel) and present a simple model for prayer ministry – one we follow at MEC.

### **APR 17 2016 – Membership Class**

Are you considering becoming a member of MEC? Join us for the next membership class and find out about becoming a member of our local church family. The class takes place at MEC after the morning service. Lunch will be provided.

### **APR 20 2016 – Alpha**

ALPHA - Do you have questions about life? Why not join us for the next Alpha - a 10 week course where you can ask any questions over a great meal and an engaging time of discussion.

### **MAY 15 2016 – Baptismal Service**

The next baptismal service will take place at MEC on Sunday the 15th of May at 10.30am. “But Leston,” I hear you say, “We don’t have a baptistery!” “That’s a minor issue for the Lord!”

**JUN 12 2016 (Sunday evening) – A Worship event with members of CfaN worship team, and Mark, the director of CfaN UK will be sharing a message as well.**

**JUL 8-10 2016 – Spree** is a youth trip for children from Years 6-10, older teens can apply to be stewards.

### **AUG 2-8 2016 - NewDay 2016**

NewDay is a major Christian youth camping event that takes place in the UK for six days each summer.

**SAT SEP 17 2016 – Refreshing Your Spiritual Life (with Andy Peck)**

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER – OUR SECOND FAITH IN ACTION CAMPAIGN where will go out and share the love of the Lord as we serve our community in practical ways as we continue to ask God to forge and form His missional heart in us.

So those are some of the highlights planned for the new year.

Something else I am particularly looking forward to is

To collectively understand and unpack the vision for the next 5 years.

You may have heard us mention about the fact that the elders have been praying about taking the next few months to prayerfully appoint and release a Ministry Leadership team.

Part of what I would like to see happen in preparation of this is to get a Strategy Team together (out of which a Ministry Leadership Team can emerge) to prayerfully and collectively seek the Lord as we begin to understand, unpack and put in place the vision God has for MEC over the next 5 years.

As you know, we started a process about a year and a half ago called NCD (Natural Church development). It was a survey that helped us to identify where we are at as a church – areas where we are strong and areas where we can grow. It was really quite insightful, and although we managed to have a couple of meetings to unpack and put some initiatives in place before moving off-site, we had to hit the pause button as we navigated through the challenges of a building project. But now that this is coming to an end, we once again have an opportunity to prayerfully and collectively begin to put feet to the vision as we prayerfully develop strategy to see God's dream become a reality.

**So what exactly will the Strategy team be doing over the next few months?**

As the name suggests, we are going to get a team of about 20 or so people together as the Lord leads and meet once a month to seek God together, to pray together, to brainstorm together, to dream together and to strategize together in order to help us better discern, understand and implement God's mission for us, His vision for us, our core values and to formulate a clear, but malleable strategy to help us get there.

In short, we are going to spend the next few months seeking God together both for His vision for MEC for the next 5 years as well as trusting Him to reveal the steps and strategies we need to implement to see it fulfilled.

I love the way Shawchuck and Heuser define this process:

“Vision is a mystical happening dreamed in the hearts of God’s servants by the Spirit. Vision cannot be planned, only received from God. As such, vision always comes from beyond us and outside of our context, and is always larger than life.”<sup>iv</sup>

What larger-than-life vision will God reveal to us? Watch this space! I can’t wait to see how God is going to lead and what unfolds in the months ahead!

### Sunday Evening Prayer and Praise

As I mentioned earlier, starting in March, we will be holding a Sunday evening Prayer and Praise service. To borrow a phrase from Ian Parkinson, we are going to call it ‘Open to God,’ and that is what we are going to be doing in large part – being open to God. There will be a time of simple sung worship, prayer and intercession as well as time waiting on God and inviting the Holy Spirit to come and do whatever He desires to do. It’s going to be a time of hosting God’s presence, allowing the Holy Spirit the freedom to move and to minister. Why? Because we cannot expect to see God’s church being built without pressing in to the presence of the God who builds His church in the first place.

Brad Long, Paul Stokes and Cindy Strickler put it so well when they say:

“The fatal mistake is often to concentrate merely on the ‘machinery’ of the church while neglecting the vitally essential work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>v</sup>

In his book *The Full Blessing of Pentecost*, Andrew Murray writes:

“The greatest need of the church, and the thing which, above all others, believers ought to seek for with one mind and with their whole heart, is to be filled with the Spirit of God... Every day ought to be a Pentecostal season in the church of Christ.”<sup>vi</sup>

David Platt continues:

“I am frightened by the reality that the church I lead can carry on most of our activities smoothly, efficiently, even successfully, never realising that the Holy Spirit is virtually absent from the picture. We can so easily deceive ourselves, mistaking the presence of physical bodies in a crowd for the existence of spiritual life in a community.”<sup>vii</sup>

### Upcoming Series

And finally, let me very briefly mention about the new series we are starting next week called *Transformed Life*. You will get an email invite this week – and I really want to encourage you to send that out to people you feel may benefit from coming along – use email, Facebook, twitter – get the word out!

Transformed Life is a new tried-and-tested church programme for the whole congregation that looks at answering three of life’s key questions:

Who am I?

Where do I fit?

What am I living for?

Underpinning the whole programme is the *Transformed Life* book, written by Senior Pastor and author Dave Smith (author of *40 days with Jesus*). Suitable for both individuals and small groups, the book looks at Ephesians 1–3, exploring the key life issues of purpose, identity and belonging.

Be challenged. Be renewed. Be transformed.

‘A practical, inspirational, dynamic resource. Highly recommended.’

- Jeff Lucas

‘Enlightening, encouraging and exciting.’ - J. John

‘Dave Smith is one of the most inspirational Christian leaders in the UK.’

- Nicky Gumbel

**That starts next Sunday, so don’t miss it!**

**Conclusion**

So there you have it a nutshell – a look at parts of our vision for 2016! Is that exciting? I really do believe we are in for an exciting year, friends! It's the next step of the great privilege and adventure of being God's vessels in our time!

So let me leave you once more with God's promise through Isaiah. May this be our reality this coming year!

*43:16 This is what the Lord says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, 17 who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: 18 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. 19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

And we say, “Yes, Lord!”

---

<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicised, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen Ross, <https://bible.org/seriespage/1-introduction-study-book-isaiah>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.new-wine.org/home/directory/500393>

<sup>iv</sup> Shawchuck and Heuser, *Leading the Congregation*, p69

<sup>v</sup> Brad long, Paul Stokes and Cindy Strickler, *Growing the Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit*, Grands Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008, p19

<sup>vi</sup> Andrew Murray, *The Full Blessing of Pentecost*, Basingstoke: Lakeland, 1984, pp.9-10

<sup>vii</sup> David Platt, *Radical*, Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010 p50