

September 27, 2015

Acts 17:22-29

*The following message was delivered to the congregation of Mt Brydges Baptist Church, together with their friends and family as we celebrated with our final service at our location in Mt Brydges. We have moved to a new building and we took time to reflect on where we had been, but also on how our Lord was leading us.*

## *Remembering the Past, Looking Ahead!*

We're gathered to bid farewell to this grand building which has been home to this faith community for 148 years – almost to the day - opened on September 29, 1867. Pioneers built this place trusting in God to guide and direct them on their way. In this place couples were married, children dedicated, souls saved and hearts surrendered to Jesus. In this place the saved have been baptised signifying their faith in Jesus. In this place families have celebrated the lives of their departed ones. Today we're gathered preparing to move on to a new location. The next chapter to be written in the life of Mt Brydges Baptist Church will be in borrowed facilities. In a similar way to when Abram left Haran, to when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, to when Joshua inherited Moses' mantle each setting out for something unknown, we too are leaving to follow as the Lord has instructed. We too wait a settling into a promised land. We don't know what our future holds, but we know who holds our future.

Today is recognition our faith doesn't depend on where we worship. We'll still value opportunities to gather with others who share our faith; we'll continue to learn and grow; we'll find new opportunities to put our faith into practice and we'll discover new avenues through which to engage in the mission of the church, locally and throughout the world. What that looks like changes – but change in that sense is good.

Looking back makes us reflective; we recall how we've gathered here for so many years – so many important events in our lives have taken place here! Marriages, baptisms, child dedications. Perhaps you're recalling your family seated here for Christmas, for Easter, for Sunday worship. Perhaps you remember others who are now gone. They've moved on worshipping elsewhere or they've gone to be with their Heavenly Father. Things change; they never remain the same. As we look back we're equipped to look ahead and recognize though our circumstances change, our God *is* the same. Think of how a generation of God's people were led by Moses through the wilderness – and then – just when it seemed they would enter the promised land, it was Joshua on whose shoulders responsibility fell to be used of God to lead His people to their new home. Yes change happens!

Today we've celebrated with thanksgiving the life and work of Mt Brydges Baptist Church as it stands at this location having served as a faithful witness to God's presence for 148 years. It's provided refuge, comfort, as well as challenges for God's people. It's served for generations the faithful people of this community. The good news is *God is not a building*; God is not brick and mortar. God is not restricted to a building located here where Mt Brydges Baptist Church has gathered these many years. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of Heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands*". [Acts 17:24] Jesus Himself would remind us, "*God is spirit and those who would worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth*" [John 4:24]. Herein lies a distinct warning to us all that neither must we attach ourselves to any gods other than the true God who's set us free through His Son Jesus Christ – that anything that keeps us from being centered on Him alone becomes a god blocking our way – a building, even a tradition; and it's an assurance we can know the true God for He is revealed in His Son Jesus our Lord and Saviour. It's a declaration that God is not dependent upon us either for worship or for recognition as truly "He has everything He needs"; rather it's for our benefit that "*He Himself gives all of us life and breath and everything else*" we have need of. Therefore let us be strong and courageous knowing our God is with us – *always!* Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah who perhaps Paul had running through his mind as he spoke to the Athenians. "*Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. Where is the house that you will build me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things my hand has made, and all those things exist,' says the LORD. 'But on this*

*one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word'.*" [Isaiah 66:1-2] Notice the character described for those to whom the Lord chooses to reveal Himself. On those who possess a contrite spirit, those who tremble at His Word! No mention of a grand building or great stature or even secure position – totally surrendered and dependent on Him.

In the north of England stands Dunstanburgh Castle, a giant 14th-century fort which now lies in ruins. The castle was built by Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, with a purpose: to declare Thomas' wealth and glory. In many ways he succeeded. Seven centuries later, the castle keeps Thomas' name alive. But in the most important sense he *failed*. A sign in front of the castle remembers Thomas as an "arrogant and unpopular" man. When we talk about our faith community and what we've achieved, it's easy to go straight to the grand building we've enjoyed and been blessed to serve from these many years. Our forefathers indeed built something that has lived on long after them as a testimony to their faithfulness. But it's not the most important part of the legacy of Mt Brydges Baptist Church.

When asked what was most important for following the Lord; keeping the commandments, Jesus replied it's fundamental we live a life of love – loving God with all our heart, soul and mind; and loving one another. [Matthew 22:37-9] The apostle Paul filled in the details of what that life of love looks like: *being* patient and kind, *avoiding* boasting and pride; *not demanding* our own way or keeping records of wrongs; *pursuing* justice and hope and *persevering* in all things. [1 Corinthians 13:4-7]

Why speak to you of love on this day of transition? Why have I focused on love rather than memories, and history, and sentimentalism? The message to us today goes beyond the immediate transition we are addressing. If we would be a people with a specific objective of our biblical foundation laid firmly on the Word of God, if we would view God's church not as another organization but as an organism – the body of Christ, then we would agree that the church is not an institution in the human sense of the word but is the people who are meeting together forming the local body in service to Jesus. Just as God instructed Joshua what to do and how to do it telling him to observe the law, to study it diligently, and obey it, we too must follow what we learn from Jesus. It's much easier to be brave when you've received guidance and instruction. We often speak of people who act out of the "courage of their convictions". It's hard to act courageously when we're not sure what the right thing to do is. Fortunately we've the clear example of our Saviour – God's own Son – and we're called to follow Him!

If we believe the church is the people of God, the body of Christ, not a building, then we must accept the gospel of the cross is the message we are to carry – a gospel shown through love even as God gave us His only Son Jesus to die for our sins. That's why I suggest today, as we look forward to what the Lord has planned for us, that God's central purpose is to make us His visible, local church founded on and known for its great love. In 1 Timothy 1:5, the Apostle Paul wrote, "*Now the goal of the commandment is love from a pure heart.*" Different churches may have more or less gifts in different areas. In the area of love, though, every church, and today our focus remains on our church, is commanded to strive for the highest standard – and there are no excuses we can give to the Lord Jesus Christ if we fail.

Jesus reminds us even the worst of people look after each other. Drunkards buy one another drinks and look out for one another [Matthew 5:46-47]. Nobody's surprised by this. But as the God's church, we're different! Christ commands us to love each other, whoever they are, rich or poor, those having it all together, those in deep need - and to love all those whom He brings across our path – especially the unwashed, the marginalized and the broken. This love's not confined within the walls of a building. It's the presence of Christ *in us* that encourages us. Paul says, "*In Him we live and move and have our being.*"

As we remember the past, as we look ahead we realize living in Him requires we place our trust in Him. The cycle of life for *Mt Brydges Baptist Church* rests in God. This day of transition provides a good opportunity for us as a congregation to return to basic questions: What is God calling us to do, at this particular time and place? What is our purpose? Why are we here? Like Joshua, like Abraham, like Paul we journey out in faith placing our hope and our trust solely in our Heavenly Father.

Therefore we remember the past, doing so with a mixture of pride, joy, sadness, even a little grief, but we also remember it's God who moves us and in whom we have our being – not a building, not a location, not a

past. We therefore look ahead knowing it is God who “*did this so we might seek after Him and perhaps reach out to Him and find Him.*”

***My prayer is this is what motivates you today.***

Finally, if you will let me throw one more verse of reassurance to you today, let it be you remember our Lord’s wonderful promise that wherever we meet, wherever He leads us, wherever we gather in service to our Lord, “*Neither death, nor life...nor things present, nor things to come...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” [Romans 8:38–39] We can be certain as we look forward having remembered the past. We have God’s Word on it! **Amen!**

**God Bless you!**

*Pastor Dave*