

All In It Together – The Global Church

A couple of weeks ago, at our anniversary service, when Kingsley was speaking to us, he used an illustration of the British Olympic athletes and in particular the men's relay team. He talked about the determination the athletes had to ensure that they did not let the team down as each of them took the baton from the person before them and ran as fast as they could and carefully handed the baton on to the next runner. Each of the athletes knew the responsibility they had for the others in their team and each of them knew also how much they relied on the other members of their team. All would succeed together or all would fail together. Anyone who is a real team player knows that they are **all in it together**.

At the beginning of the book of Acts we are given the introduction to an exciting relay race. The most enormous, most exciting, most important relay race the world has ever seen. The church of Jesus Christ has begun. Jesus has trained and equipped his disciples and now he is handing the baton on to them to continue the work of growing the kingdom of God on Earth. To be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. This is amazing stuff isn't it? You get this sense of anticipation and excitement; like the athlete waiting to be handed the baton, arm outstretched behind, finding the pace of the previous runner and ready to sprint to play their part in the relay race. What an amazing privilege!

And what a responsibility. If they drop the baton now, it's not only their ministry that will suffer, it's the church of Jesus Christ. If they fail now, people will not hear the good news of Jesus who need to hear it. Some of us may think about quitting the team at this point. The risk of getting it wrong is too great, we don't want to let people down, we feel inadequate, out of shape, flabby Christians, probably better to leave it to someone else. Someone more reliable. Someone like... Saul, the Christian terrorist. The man who put fear and dread into the hearts of anyone who dared to speak positively about Jesus of Nazareth. Saul did everything he could to immobilise the church of Jesus Christ. Saul did all he could to damage the reputation of Jesus.

You would have to look pretty hard to find a worse CV for an evangelist. But this is God's team and God invites the most unlikely people to be part of his team. And God has this amazing ability to transform and change lives and turn even our negatives into positives. God changed Saul's life, in fact he was so transformed that even his name was changed from Saul to Paul and God turned Paul from a church persecutor to a church planter.

Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, well Paul almost did that single handed. He went to a phenomenal amount of places to tell people about the saving power of Jesus Christ and about the kingdom of God. Many of the people Paul spoke to didn't know the gospel of Jesus Christ and they had mixed up ideas about God.

One example of this is when Paul is in Athens.

Acts 17:16-23

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where

they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul goes on to tell them about the one true God who made all things. Some thought he was a nutcase but others listened to what Paul was saying and they became followers of Jesus, joining Paul in the mission to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

The book of Acts is full of stories of people coming to accept the good news of Jesus and new churches being started as a result. So why am I telling you all this? What's it got to do with us? Well, this is our roots. It is because of people like Paul who shared the gospel that we got to hear the good news. If the disciples had kept it to themselves, we ourselves would not be saved. But it's much more than that. We now have the baton, we are integrated into the story. The task of spreading the good news to the ends of the earth is not finished yet, it goes on and we, along with churches all over the world have our part to play, we are all in it together.

So what can we do?

There are ways that we can ALL be involved.

The most obvious thing is that you could go on a mission. Many of you have been on short term missions, some of you on long-term missions. There are many organisations now that you can team up with so you go with a group of people for a week or two. It is such a small amount of time to give up but the difference this can make to people in other countries can last a lifetime.

BMS is one organisation that we support in this church. BMS are now working in over 30 countries on 4 continents, reaching out to people with the love of Jesus in all sorts of ways (as we saw on the DVD). Maybe you would consider going on a short term mission with BMS. As you saw in the DVD, you don't have to be a preacher to share the gospel, in many practical ways we can show the love of Jesus to people and it is often our actions that speak louder and more clearly than our words. Some parts of the world do need practical help. Help to build new facilities, or help to learn new techniques so as people can work safer and smarter.

But it's not all about digging wells and building projects. Spreading the gospel is a sacrifice and some people have to become TV stars. BMS are involved in something known as SAT-7. This is a satellite TV channel that broadcasts to many countries where the gospel cannot be given freely. Countries that do not have the luxury of freedom of speech. Here the use of modern technology is enabling evangelism in places where it would otherwise be impossible. In some of these countries satellite TV is forbidden by law. Yet, satellite dishes litter the rooftops. Basically this is because with so many people owning a satellite dish, the government are powerless to do anything about it. They can't prosecute the whole country. It is by this means that SAT-7 is able to be broadcast and many have come to faith in Jesus Christ through it.

Of course, many people devote their lives to world mission. BMS have many workers who move lock, stock and barrel to other countries to live among the people. I think they call that 'Incarnational ministry'. It may be that God is calling you to that kind of ministry, but even if He isn't,

there are ways that we can support those who God has called to these ministries, we are all in it together.

One way to support our brothers and sisters who are called to the mission field is financially. As a church here, we give away a percentage of our income to charities such as BMS. So that is perhaps the simplest way of giving a little bit. But you may want to give specifically to BMS. Well there is a way that you can do that simply within the church. You could join the BMS Birthday Scheme. How many of you at work have to buy cakes for your team when it's your birthday? Well, the BMS Birthday Scheme is a bit like that, the way it works is that when it's your birthday, and hopefully you receive lots of gifts, you give a gift to BMS.

But I'm not after your money, in fact, if you really want to do something to help your brothers and sisters in other parts of the world then save yourself some money. I'm talking about using less energy. This is something that BMS feel so strongly about that they wrote to the Prime Minister about it prior to the recent conference in Copenhagen. You see, because BMS workers are living in parts of the world that are most affected by climate change, they are already seeing the effects it is having. They know about it first hand because they are having to deal with the issues of climate change. So this is an area that BMS are very involved in. They see it as caring for God's people worldwide. In this country some joke about global warming saying it will be nice to have some warmer weather. While a bit of warmer weather may be nice for us, global warming spells disaster for others. To drive that message home to us, if you are out and about in London on 5th December you may see a lot of people wearing blue. This is an organised march called "the wave" and BMS are one of the organisations supporting this.

So you see being part of the global church is much more diverse than preaching and it's much more than digging a well (though both are certainly needed). But perhaps the greatest thing that we can do for our fellow brothers and sisters, in this country in particular, is to stand alongside them. To show we care by actually going and visiting them. To experience their world for ourselves, even if only briefly. It means a lot when people from Britain are prepared to go in person. At the last night of the proms a favourite song that is sung contains the words "Britons never shall be slaves". But Britain was certainly a key player in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. We exploited our position and took advantage of others. Yes, other countries were involved and other countries initiated it, but Britain turned the slave trade into a more lucrative business than anyone else did.

Kingsley spoke of the good that our country has done for other countries. That is certainly true and I don't want to take any of that away, but we must also not shut our eyes to the fact that we have also done a lot of damage. Because of the damage we have done, many countries still view us as being superior and certainly it has contributed to our relative wealth. We may not agree with what our ancestors did but let's not just close our eyes and pretend it has nothing to do with us. We have an opportunity, a responsibility to heal damaged nations.

We can stand alongside them, we can show we care. If you read on past the book of Acts, you'll find many letters written by Paul encouraging those churches that he planted. And not just letters, Paul went back in person to support the churches he started. Paul had a wider perspective of the church.

We can support churches and pastors in other countries too. Many of you will remember Calin being here from Romania. Calin shared with us how difficult life is for Christians in his area. Calin has asked us if we will go to Romania. Richard and Sue are going in April and Ruth and I are hoping to go in May.

These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all part of the same body. When one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. When we support one part, we support the whole. So let's not only think of ourselves as Ashurst Drive Baptist Church in Gants Hill. Let's also think of ourselves as Ashurst Drive Baptist Church in Gants Hill, part of God's world wide church. This is the global church of Jesus Christ and we are all in it together.