

Be encouraged, God is in control.

I'd have to say that this has been quite a week; it's been what you may call a roller-coaster of emotions, thoughts and memories – all mixed together into a great melting pot! All of this began a little over a fortnight ago when an early morning phone call came from Tom my brother-in-law to tell me that Stuart my younger brother had died suddenly in the early hours of the morning. It was a big shock. He was thirteen months younger than me, and the last time we saw him was at my Dad's funeral in October. Of course with the suddenness of all of this the Coroner had to be involved and that all added to the overwhelming bewilderment and confusion of the situation.

I think that one of the most perplexing thoughts in all of this is that it was only at the beginning of autumn that Stuart and Sarah (*his wife*) and Josh and Lucy announced that they would be moving from their home in Littlehampton to Brighton to be a part of a new church plant, centred on the huge Parish Church of St Peter, Brighton,. St Peter's is situated on what is essentially a traffic island not far from the famous Brighton Dome and Pavilion. It's really huge, and for some time its congregation had been struggling to find a way forward in the face of overwhelming indifference, local apathy, and downright hostility from the local community. Various plans for saving the church were discussed, but somehow the situation was very bleak and just about hopeless.

Into all of this chaos and confusion and yes, discouragement, came a ray of hope. The well known Holy Church, Brompton saw a possibility of planting a new church in an old building. As you all know, Holy Trinity is the home of the Alpha Course and the powers-that-be in HTB saw that St Peter's could make a wonderful centre for mission and evangelism in Brighton. And so it was. In November the new church was launched, and into all of this came Stuart and Sarah Bellamy and their two children.

Immediately keen to be involved, Stuart and Sarah got involved in the church's welcome ministry. After the first services they got together with the welcomers to discuss how they could improve on their ministry of welcome. And you know, the ministry of welcome in a church is the most important ministry we can offer. It can never be under-estimated. First impressions count, and if a church is friendly and welcoming, then there's a very good chance that the casual visitor will return. We do well to take note of that and to always go heavy on the how do you do!

Not only was there a ministry of welcome however, there was also a ministry of praying with people in all sorts of circumstances. And Stuart was in the thick of that, praying for and with people who walked through the door of that church. Because this is another very vital ministry of the church:

*It is the house of prayer,
Wherein thy servants meet
And thou O Lord art there,
Thy chosen flock to greet....*

So a ministry of prayer and welcome, supporting, under-pinning the work of a fledgling church was what Stuart and Sarah were now revelling in – thoroughly enjoying every moment of it, and giving it all the time they could possibly manage in the midst of busy professional lives.

And then sudden illness – not apparently life threatening at first, but then sudden death...

I have to admit that I found the whole thing very perplexing. It's easy to talk about being positive as a Christian, but I remember Dad Bellamy once saying that it's not always the easiest thing to remain on the victory side. There can be moments of discouragement.

Have you experienced discouragement? Has life thrown disappointments at you, leaving you saddened and perplexed? Believe me, if you haven't, you will. That's life!

The breakdown of a relationship,
The loss of a job

The doctor walks into the room and shakes his head sadly

And all these things strike us and lead us to despair and discouragement.

What do we do then?

My point of perplexity in these recent days has been centred upon the question "How can it be?" How is it that a couple can feel so led of God to move from their home to a new area, to be a part of a vibrant new church plant only for it to come to a sudden and unexpected end?

Well, with all those thoughts we drove down through rain, sleet and snow to Brighton – an endless journey. The next day we called to visit with the family. And it was very sad, a young family in grief; and yet somehow there was an underlying peace and tranquillity in all of it.

The Memorial Service came on Friday. And it was into St Peter's Church where there is no central heating at the moment, and where, due to falling masonry a large part of the building is curtained off, into that space more than 250 people came to listen to the story of the life of a Christian couple. And suddenly, as the Vicar, Archie Coates spoke the light began to shine through into this dark situation....

He spoke of how he had first met Stuart who was full of enthusiasm for the project. There were all kinds of objects and difficulties perceived in this church plant, but Stuart had advised that they not struggle to dot every "i" and cross every "t" but move ahead and let God lead.... and this was the encouragement that was needed in the face of almost overwhelming odds.

You know, we need to do that in this parish. So very often we get bogged down in endless and tedious minutiae, which can drive you crazy, and which ultimately leads nowhere. What's that saying "The devil is in the detail...." How we need to move ahead and let God lead us. If we were to do that we'd see a real transformation in the life of our parishes – led by the Holy Spirit of God himself.

And then Archie answered my question. He drew our attention to the Apostle Paul's words of encouragement to the Corinthians. It was so inspiring that I immediately decided that I'd have to share it with you all today... Paul says:

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."

This move was somehow not in vain. More rather, it is of infinite value in the plan of God who takes all things and uses them for his glory. Moreover, nothing that we do is ever wasted. Then Archie reminded us of that great miracle of the Feeding of the 5000, and a detail which we so often overlook; after the people had been fed with five barley loaves and two fish, the disciples were told to collect up that which was left over and they came back with twelve baskets full of the leftovers. Nothing is wasted with God. We do not see the big picture, but God does, and everything that we attempt in the service of God from arranging flowers to mopping a floor, to singing in a choir, to offering a word of kindly or prayerful encouragement – these are all taken up by God and used beyond our wildest dreams.... and nothing that we do ever goes to waste!

So the message to you today is that no matter what life's circumstances may be, and the going can get very tough indeed – no matter what – we should **never be discouraged** because we have a great and mighty God, and he is in control. He will take all things that we offer in his Service and use them in ways which we could never even begin to imagine, and when we see him on that great day, he'll say "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord".

Be encouraged – God is in control. Keep the Faith..... Hallelujah!

Let us pray. Lord God Almighty, even though our life sometimes seems hopeless, we thank you that you will never let us down. You made us to soar. You made us to live victorious lives and to be a blessing to others, so we wait on you knowing that our times are in your hands. We expect you to be our resurrection and our life. We believe it. Thank You Lord, Amen.