

## **2005: A Year for knowing true joy**

May I begin this letter by wishing you all not simply a *happy* new year (as is the custom of so many in our society during the early days of January), but a year truly *filled with the joy of Jesus!*

Our personal happiness (or its absence) is a mood largely determined by what happens to happen to us - pleasant or unpleasant experiences. The recent tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia reminds us that we live in an unpredictable world in which catastrophes can strike anyone anywhere at any time - and often without any warning.

Our heartfelt prayers go out to all those who have lost loved ones so unexpectedly through the disaster. Through the various relief agencies at work in the region, our help rightly seeks to reach out to those who have suffered appalling injuries, or the loss of their homes and possessions in the wake of the devastating waves which struck so many shorelines. Many have lost their source of livelihood as well as their homes and possessions in the aftermath of the disaster, particularly those involved in fishing, agriculture and tourism. The resources required for reconstruction will be immense. It's a situation in which every penny given, through whatever channels, will be valued.

On a personal note, let me take this opportunity of thanking all of you who kindly enquired after my Andrew's welfare. We are grateful that he was safely in Bangkok when the earthquake struck southern Thailand, and he will shortly be returning to Laos to resume his teaching duties there.

Wearing my hat as the Chairman of IREF(UK), let me also thank all of you who have given so generously to help our brothers and sisters in India, as they seek to bring aid to those stricken by the disaster along coastline of Andhra Pradesh.

Our personal sense of happiness at any given moment in time is largely dictated by the circumstances we happen to find ourselves in. But the joy we can know as Christians runs much deeper. It is based on a sure and certain knowledge of God's unchanging love and faithfulness towards us, and his overarching purpose for our lives.

*We know that in all things  
God works for the good of those who love him,  
who have been called according to his purpose.*

[Romans 8.28]

God's purpose is that we should come to know him in an ever-deeper way and glorify him through *all* that happens to us (whether pleasant or unpleasant). In all we are and in all we do, in all we think and say, the greater glory of Jesus is our goal. James reminds us that this is why we can be joyful even in the midst of the most disturbing happenings.

*Consider it **pure joy**, my brothers,  
whenever you face trials of many kinds,  
because you know that the testing of your faith  
develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish  
its work so that you may be mature and complete.*

[James 1.2-4]

Every fresh difficulty life throws at us is a new opportunity to prove God's faithfulness to us, and his keeping-power over us (2 Cor 1.8-11; 1 Peter 1.3-7).

Peter reminds us that when our sights are set firmly on Jesus, we can experience a joy so deep that as to defy description!

*Though you have not seen him, you love him;  
and even though you do not see him now,  
you believe in him and are filled with  
**an inexpressible and glorious joy**,  
for you are receiving the goal of your faith,  
the salvation of your souls.*

[1 Peter 1.8-9]

## **2005: A Year of Opportunity**

Our Verse-for the Year for 2005 speaks of the open door of opportunity that God has set before us.

*These are the words of him who is holy and true.  
See, I have placed before you an open door  
that no one can shut.*

[Revelation 3.7-8]

By Easter, we hope to have our new access ramps and toilet facilities in place, so that our building is fully accessible to the public. Let me say a big thank you to all of you who prayed in response to our December Newsletter for the outstanding funds to be supplied for the work. We received over £7,500 by way of donations and grants during the month, for which we give all the praise and glory to God! This first phase of our refurbishment work is a powerful statement of intent. We want to provide an open door to the public to come in and use the facilities God has entrusted to us.



And in so doing, we want people to discover that Jesus is real and relevant to their lives.

Inevitably, it will mean a little disruption for us as a church. But I believe the longer-term gains will far outweigh any short-term inconvenience. For as we make ourselves more accessible to other people - not just through the improved access to our church building, but out and about in the community too, wherever God places us - I believe we can expect God to open up all sorts of new opportunities for us to share his love and truth with people.

Our Sunday morning *Verse-of-the-Year* message reminded us of a number of important principles concerning God's open doors of opportunity.

➤ **Jesus is sovereign when it comes to opening doors of opportunity (v7).** *What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open* (Rev 3.7; see Acts 16.6-10; Prov 16.9; Acts 8.5-40). As we think about all the new opportunities that will arise for us as a church, following on from our accessibility work, we should pray that Jesus will show us clearly which doors *he* wants to open up to us. Our verse calls us first to *see* the open doors of opportunity. They may be new doors, or doors that have hitherto been closed to us. But the important thing is for us to *see* them and then walk confidently through them.

➤ **Jesus opens up doors of opportunity in response to his people's prayers (Col 4.3).** Paul asked people to *pray that God may open a door for our message*. Paul was in prison at the time. But the door he most wanted to swing open was not the door of his prison cell, but a door of opportunity for sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. That's the kind of door Jesus will open up to us in any place and at any time, if we ask him. We don't have to try and batter down doors that seem to be closed; we simply need to pray them open! For us as a Church at this time, there are a number of doors we should be praying open.

- There are *the doors of people's hearts* – the hearts of some of those who come to our clubs on a Friday night, for instance. I believe we should be praying that 2005 will bring conversions amongst many of these children and young people.
- Then there are the *doors of those who live in the streets around the church*. When we went out carol singing before Christmas, we were very warmly received – particularly in the Milton Square area. Perhaps we should revisit them with some *Jesus* videos at Easter.
- There is also a street of *new homes* only a couple of blocks away from the church. We must pray for God to open up some front doors to us there.
- Another possibility we have been considering as deacons is the establishment of *a daytime group for men*. We

have one for women, so why not have one for men! We are blessed with plenty of recreational facilities that men would enjoy – snooker, pool, table tennis and carpet bowls. An informal group could be a great means of making contact with men in the local area, as well as providing a time of fellowship for some of our own male members.

➤ **Jesus opens up doors of opportunity to those who are relatively weak.** Jesus said to the Christians in Philadelphia, *"I know that you have little strength"* (Rev 3.8). This was not a reference to their *spiritual* state of health, which appears to have been relatively robust according to the rest of the letter. Rather, it recognised their *numerical* weakness. The Church may have had only a couple of dozen members. But small numbers are no hindrance to God creating big opportunities for his people, as the story of Gideon proves (Judges 7). We can still be bold, even though we're not very big, as David proved when facing Goliath!

➤ **When Jesus opens up doors of opportunity, we must walk through them boldly and confidently.** We mustn't make the mistake the Israelites made, when God opened up that door of opportunity for them to enter into the Promised Land. The land was a good one, flowing with milk and honey. But the Israelites got cold feet. All they could see were the giants. They believed the task would prove too difficult for them, and they would end up defeated and demoralised. But the upshot of their diffidence was 40 years of wasted wanderings in the wilderness (Numbers 13-14).

➤ **Open doors don't always lead to easy paths.** In 1 Cor 16.8-9, Paul told his readers that he would *stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me*. When Jesus opens up new doors for us to walk through, there will often be obstacles to overcome and opposition to resist. Satan doesn't give up his ground easily; but victory is assured for those who belong to Jesus and who persevere in doing his will (Rev 3.11-12).

**As we look forward to the next 12 months, may we see clearly the doors of opportunity Jesus will open up to us, and boldly walk through them to exploit the opportunities ahead.**

**David Hunt**