

An Exciting Year Ahead

In God's goodness, 2008 has all the potential for being one of the most exciting and fruitful years that Christians in the UK, and in the North East in particular, have known for many decades.

Hope 2008 has been chosen as the umbrella slogan for a multitude of initiatives, both national and local. The slogan sends out a powerful message to our nation, and to every individual within it, reminding us all that, despite the many gloomy predictions pundits often make around this time of year, *there's hope for everyone, and that hope is to be found in Jesus!*

➤ Hope for our nation

January is the month when all sorts of experts leap (or loathe) to make predictions for the coming year. Some predict plenty of good news: new advances in medicine; exciting and innovative technologies; and even Sunderland to stay in the Premiership!

But many commentators are pessimistic by nature, having watched the world spiral into decline for so long. And so amidst the many positive predictions, there are always plenty of gloomy ones too – a housing crash, economic meltdown, no gold medals for Britain at the Beijing Olympics, extreme weather patterns due to increased global warming, rising violence on our streets, and international turmoil. These latter predictions remind us of some famous words of Jesus.

You will hear of wars and rumours of wars - nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. But see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. All these are the beginning of birth pains. [Matthew 24.6-8]

Jesus tells us not to become alarmed when things appear to go wrong in the world. It's all part of the process, firmly in God's hands, that will eventually climax in our Lord's triumphant return to earth at the end of this present age, to establish his perfect kingdom of righteousness, joy and peace forever [2 Peter 3.3].

So a firm faith in God, rather than blind panic or a misplaced self-confidence (an assumption that we can work things out ourselves), is the response we should make to every crisis we face as a nation – whether economic, political or climactic. We should call on God for mercy, for our many faults and failings. We should be prepared to repent of all our sins and shortcomings. And we should pray to God for wisdom,

for the way ahead. For when we do all these things, we will discover *there is real hope for our nation!*

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people. [Proverbs 14.34]

Our faith, hope, and confidence must always be in the one true Living God - not in ourselves, or in our own abilities, skills, insights and inventions, however clever these might be. Nor should we place our hope in modern technologies, or in human institutions, or in charismatic leaders, to solve all our problems. These things all have their place in God's good ordering of his world. But ultimately, our hope must be pinned on God himself, who will never let us down (Rom 10.11).

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this, we labour and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe. [1 Timothy 4.9-10]

➤ Hope for individuals

We live in a more troubled society than ever before, despite our economic prosperity. There were over 140,000 divorces in the UK in 2005 (the most recent year for which figures are available), resulting in perhaps as many as half a million people suffering a family breakdown, when children are included too. And that's just for one year. Across the UK as a whole, approximately 25% of children are currently being raised in single parent families.

Many other individuals feel a sense of despondency or despair. They feel they are missing out what life should be offering them. They experience little or no joy or peace. Everything seems to be an uphill struggle, or a grinding treadmill, with no obvious relief or way out of their pain.

To people like this, our **Verse-for-the-Year** for 2008 speaks with tremendous power – and great hope!

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. [Romans 15.13]

Our chosen verse for 2008 reminds us that God himself is characterised by hope! It's part of his make-up to be supremely optimistic rather than pessimistic. And he longs to impart that sense of hope to others – to all who are prepared to trust in him. He wants us to *overflow with hope* through the power of his active Spirit within us. He wants us to experience great *joy and peace* in

our lives, as we prove his trustworthiness, day after day, whatever our circumstances. He will never let anyone down! He has provided Jesus as a sure foundation for our lives.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed. [Isaiah 28.16; quoted in Rom 10.11]"

➤ **Hope for all of eternity**

Whenever the Bible speaks about our future hope, it's referring to what one person has called 'our happy certainty'. There are no ifs and maybes about what God has promised us for the life to come. Our future hope of eternal life in the glorious presence of God has been guaranteed by his Son's resurrection from death.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. [1 Cor 15.19-22]"

Our Christian hope for the age to come is a glorious and certain one! We will be clothed in a new resurrection body, perfectly fitted to last for eternity. We will live in a rebuilt universe, the *new heaven and new earth* that God has promised us (2 Peter 3.13; Rev 21.1). We will be reunited with all of God's people - both those have gone before us and those who will come after us (1 Thess 4.13-17). And best of all, we will bask in the glorious presence of Jesus, forevermore (John 17.24).

This is the message of hope that we have the privilege of proclaiming throughout 2008! We want to take every opportunity to do so as a church. We mustn't let this unique opportunity pass us by!

A Timeline of Hope

The **Hope 2008** initiative is built around several key time slots throughout the year.

➤ **Jan/Feb** has been designated a time for **Fresh Hope**, with a focus on inviting friends to various contact-making events. So make good use of our *Mezzanine* events in these two months and also the *All-age Thursday Club Service, 3rd February*.

Like many other churches, we will be running a six-week course called *Breaking News* in our Small Groups, during February and March. It is a course that has been designed to help us share the Good News of

Jesus more effectively with our friends and contacts. Our Sunday morning services will also follow this theme.

It would be good to use our Small Groups for focussing prayer on those we hope to witness to over the course of the year. *Prayer Triplets* are a way of coming together with two other friends to pray for three contacts each, nine in all, in a concerted and focussed way. This is something that could be done through our Small Groups.

Plan to be at our *Special Midweek Meeting, 7.30pm Wednesday 6th February* to discuss these and other ideas for the year, especially our involvement in *J John's Just 10* summer mission (see below).

➤ **March** will be the month for **The Big Hope**, based around the events of Easter. We will be holding two special services on *Easter Sunday, 23rd March*.

➤ **Apr/Jun** will feature **J John's Just 10 Mission**, every Tuesday evening from *22nd April – 24th June* at the Flower Festival Site at Lobley Hill, Gateshead. It's not too soon to think about whom you could be inviting to these meetings!

➤ **May** picks up the theme of **Hope Where You Live**, with a particular emphasis on the two Bank Holiday weekends. Christians throughout the UK will be encouraged to give *One Million Hours of Kindness* to their local communities through various social action projects. The aim will be to meet people's practical needs in loving and imaginative ways.

Pentecost Sunday, 11th May 2008, has been designated a *Global Day of Prayer*, with a focus on **Hope for the World**.

➤ **September** will see the launch of **Hope Explored**, with churches running courses such as *Christianity Explored* to help enquirers explore the claims of Christ on their lives.

➤ **November** will see the return of *Prom Praise* to The Sage Gateshead on **Saturday 8th November**. It will be a fitting way to celebrate God's goodness to us during 2008. Tickets will be available soon. Book through the church for a 10% discount!

David Hunt