

Here we are at a magical number in our church history - 123, the number of years since 1892, when we were first constituted as a Baptist Church in Botley! Ten years prior, Mr James Launchbury began holding Baptist services in his cottage in Old Botley, one of the houses that looked like those just behind McDonald's, and not far from there!

Our lives are run by numbers: our transport is numbered, we buy and sell using numbers (money), some countries tell you the number of children you can have, and so on. Our lives are run by numbers, and so is the Church!

On our anniversary Sunday, it is good to be reminded of 4 things we should be counting, correctly:

ATTENDANCE - not counting how many are present in church, rather measuring the commitment of people who are in *faithful fellowship* with each other.

GIVING - not counting how much money people give or raise, or how much the church has; rather measuring the commitment of people to faithfully *meet the needs* of the Church and the needs of the community.

LEADERSHIP - not counting how many Ministers, Deacons and committees a church has, rather measuring people *committed to the future* of the Church;

And finally, **DISCIPLESHIP**, not counting how many are baptised or brought into membership, rather measuring people committed to *continually learning to live life* by God's standards, God's values, and God's principles.

Together, these “measures” are an **indication** of a church’s preparedness to meet its needs and obligations today, and into the future, but a church’s true preparedness is its **ability** to accomplish God’s mission, where it is planted!

God is the Sovereign Ruler of history. Events in the world around us, may seem like there is no purpose to creation, or no meaning to human life. The way it is going, the world might not make sense, but God invites us to look at the world from **His** point of view. The Bible is God’s invitation to see the world as He sees it, an invitation to join Him with faith, trusting Him for what He is doing.

Our God is a God of vision and hope. No human situation is beyond His power to save and recover. The prophet Isaiah offers us a picture of God’s amazing hope, a picture which is appropriate for us as a Baptist Church in Botley at this time in our history. This is what he says:

*Make the tent you live in, larger;
lengthen its ropes and strengthen the pegs,
and stretch it by the curtains,
without holding back!¹*

A normal tent has a fixed size. God asks us to make the tent “larger”, by lengthening the cords that tie it to the ground, then stretch the “curtains” and finally, strengthen the pegs.

There, your tent is enlarged!

You might well say, ***“Well Kalyan, this is a wonderful image, and it sounds easy and simple enough, but I am not sure how practical this is. Are you***

¹ Isaiah 54:2 (718 in GNB)

suggesting we open the church to everyone? I thought the church was for the elect and the select!"

We said earlier, through His Word, God invites us to view the world from His point of view. What then does God mean, when He asks us to "enlarge your tent".

First, God says "enlarge the place of **YOUR** tent". He is not suggesting we buy a larger tent; He asks us to enlarge **OUR** tent where it is pitched.

How do we do this? God suggests, we start by lengthening the cords of the tent. The cords hold the shape of the tent, connecting its height to the ground. When the cords have been made longer, God suggests we stretch the curtains. Curtains are the side walls of the tent, which give more usable space inside the tent. Stretch the curtains but tying them to the longer cords.

"Lengthen your cords and stretch the curtains of your habitation, and do not hold back!"

In the same way, we trust the cords to hold the tent erect and not collapse on us, so too should be our faith in God. Hitching the curtains (walls) of the tent to the cords, opens the tent to the elements.

Are we prepared for our faith to be stretched? Look at what God has given us, the people, the resources at our disposal and ask yourself, "Am I ready to lengthen the cords of our tent and stretch back the curtains of our tent, without holding back?"

There is a final item of preparation necessary to "enlarge your tent". God says, "Strengthen your stakes (pegs)". The pegs we use to pitch our tent

should be strong enough to take the tension of the lengthened cord, when it is stretched to its max.

The only thing strong and robust enough to anchor our faith when it is stretched, is the Word of God. The deeper the word of God is rooted, the more firm our faith!

Now, watch God use your faith, anchored in His Word, to bless the community where your tent is pitched!

The church is ALWAYS buffeted and battered by gale force winds of hate, greed, rebellion, hostility, winds which test the strength of the cords. But God invites us to view the world through His eyes, to see others with His compassion and His love.

A church's greatest blessing from God, is not money and property; it is **people. NOT** people who are perfect, but people being made perfect, whom God brings into the Church who are committed to regular fellowship with each other, people committed to the present needs and future potential of the church, people committed to living by God's laws, **AND** people who are willing to have their faith in God stretched to the max, because they and their lives are anchored to the Word of God.

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes."

How shall we respond to this vision from God, for Botley Baptist Church on this our anniversary Sunday?

AMEN