



Recently I sat down to type out a branch report for Castle Buildings and noticed it was growing into a dissertation (brevity is not my gift). So, ever mindful of editors growling about space restrictions, I thought I should let the excess spill out into an article instead. A short article, I told myself.

Castle Buildings CU group had been studying the parables of the lost sheep, coin and son, and discussions of the passage (Luke 15) had sparked some very thought-provoking ideas. One was to do with how we look at other people. The Pharisees saw sinners as people to be avoided. Not only avoided, but to be ostracised by everyone. They therefore turned the weapon of their critical murmuring on the Son of God, whose beauty of life and divine love had attracted the sinners to Him to hear what He had to say. In the CU group, we were asking ourselves how we see our colleagues. Do we see them as unattractive, to be drawn back from, or do we see them as worth seeking? We began then to realise that often we don't see them as worth seeking because we don't really believe that God can change them and bring them back. Like the Pharisees, we look at the prodigal son, far away, in his destitution and rebellion, and that's as far as we can see. Unlike the waiting father, we cannot see the day when they will return, repentant, and make the long journey from the foreign land into the home where they belong.

I was thinking about this, and thinking that it is because we lack faith. We can't see potential in our lost colleagues because their rebellion and destitution is all too visible, whilst seeing them as the Christians they could become is invisible and takes faith in God. So often we look on the outside. I have frequently heard Christians saying of someone who is unsaved, "they would make such a great Christian if only they'd get saved, as they're so nice/kind/whatever." But God looks on the hard and the impossible, and says, "they shall be mine."

I was also thinking about lack of faith (mine) in terms of our CU groups. Again, it's to do with vision. We see the humdrum meetings and how quickly even the times of blessing dissipate when we go back to the office. We see our constant failures and weakness in the Christian life, and we don't ask God for more because we can't see beyond the actual and the now, to the possible in God.

Many of our CU groups may seem to be in parlous situations – people who have been faithful for years are discouraged and tired. Many Christians in the building would never think of attending, and that can discourage those who do. In Castle Buildings we have a prayer meeting every Tuesday and have seen great blessing from it, but it is only recently that we (and still only occasionally) pray for our own Thursday Bible Study meeting. Why am I so slow to ask God specifically to bless our CU group?

It's so easy to hand-wring about the temperature of our faith these days and the falling membership numbers, and yet how little I actually pray. And yet, I have noticed that when we do pray for our Thursday meeting, we are really blessed there. So I suppose I just wanted to share some of these thoughts (in case you're a slow learner like me). I'm sure other CU members and groups are streets ahead of us but I wanted to write these things down, for myself if nothing else, to encourage me to pray more for my own group.

The words, "enquire of Me" had come into my head when thinking about our CU group and our weekly prayer meeting, and after a search through the concordance, I found a passage in Ezekiel 36:34–38, and particularly verse 37, which says: "Thus saith the Lord GOD: I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock." The passage also talks about the effect of God's increase of the house of Israel on the heathen. And if our groups thrived – really thrived - what a witness that would be to the prodigal sons around us. As I was looking at the Ezekiel passage, I suddenly noticed that it flows immediately into the next chapter on the valley of dry bones and it again struck me that it, too, is all about vision and faith. This is the challenge which God presents to us – do we look in the flesh, or do we see by the Spirit? The deadness is around us, often within us, and very in-our-face (verse 11: "our bones are dried, and our hope is lost"). We can't help but see that. But the challenge is "Son of man, can these bones live?" If only we could get past the doubtful glimpses to see, steadily and spiritually, our lost colleagues as dead sons who can be made alive, and our CU groups as dead bones which can be filled with the Spirit to become "an exceeding great army."