

MOTTO TEXT 2005 ISAIAH 54:2

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

Our motto text this year is one that you may identify with if you enjoy camping and you know all about putting up tents.

Putting it in its original context, you'll see that the NIV heading is 'The Future Glory of Zion'. The words of Isaiah chapter 54 are addressed to God's Old Testament people for a time when they were at their lowest ebb.

Their land had been invaded. Their army had been defeated. Their leaders had been murdered. Their temple had been destroyed. Their population had been transported. Their whole belief-system had been shattered.

God likens the stricken nation to the world which was destroyed by the flood in the days of Noah. He likens them to a city lashed by storms and not comforted. Tyranny, terror, attack and destruction had been their lot.

But in the midst of this horror there comes a message of hope. In the midst of this shame there comes the promise of future glory.

"Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD.' The image changes from a flooded world and a shattered city to a woman, 'a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected' (verse 6). Deserted, distressed, rejected, and then widowed, a barren woman who never bore a child, and God's message is 'Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour.' Why? 'Because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.'

Disappointment will be turned into fulfilment. Desolation will be turned into joy. Miraculously, the woman who was never in labour will have more children than other married women.

It's in the light of this imagery that we read verse 2. 'Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.' It's saying, 'You're going to have children. You're going to have a home life. So get ready. Your tent isn't big enough. Start making plans to accommodate this family.'

Jesus told a story in the New Testament that might seem to conflict with this, the story of the rich fool. Luke 12:16-21.

'16 And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' 21 This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.'"

Jesus' parable is directed towards selfish people who just live for the present with no thought for eternity. If we make that an excuse for doing nothing we are missing the point completely. If God gives you a promise and God tells you to expand you can't use this parable as an excuse for disobedience.

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Your tent

When the LORD took the descendants of Abraham and led them out of slavery in Egypt and forged them into a nation he made a place where his presence could live with them. It was a tabernacle – a tent.

In the New Testament we read of Jesus that ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14) The word ‘lived’ suggests the idea of living in a tent.

When Paul described the difference between life on earth and life in heaven he wrote, ‘Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.’

This imagery reminds us that our time down here is not permanent. Jesus said, ‘Don’t lay up treasures on earth. Lay up treasure in heaven.’ The aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian ocean shocks us. The loss of life in wars around the world sickens us. But these things do not affect the death rate. Sooner or later we’re all going to die. This life is not permanent. It’s a tent rather than a house.

But while a tent is not permanent it’s not static either. The nomadic life is flexible. It allows you to move on, to venture into new territory, to discover new opportunities.

Enlarge the place of your tent

The LORD isn’t talking here about moving on so much as making more room. Make your tent bigger. Stretch your tent curtains wide. A tent doesn’t have doors. It has curtains. That speaks of easy access. There is a measure of vulnerability there but also openness for visitors to come in and for the owners to go out.

This is a challenge to us as a church. Recent damage and claims on the insurance have led the insurance company to advise us, in effect, to turn the church into a fortress. That’s not the picture God is giving us here.

Stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back. Do you remember the story of Elisha and the widow? She was deep in debt and she just had a small amount of oil. Elisha said, ‘Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few.’ While ever there were more jars she kept pouring but when all the jars were full the oil stopped flowing (2 Kings 4:1–7). Don’t ask for just a few. Don’t hold back.

Lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes

There are two things here. Make your tent ropes longer and drive your tent pegs deeper. If you just make the tent larger and don’t make the supports stronger it will blow down in the first bit of bad weather.

Throughout the Bible we find this blend of lengthening and strengthening. Colossians 2:6, 7. ‘So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.’ Rooted – built up. Strengthened – overflowing.

It’s there again in 1 Peter 5:10. It talks about the chill winds of suffering that threaten our stability. ‘And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.’

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That’s the text the Lord has laid on my heart for this year. What is its specific application to us as a church?

Enlarge the place of your tent

Get ready for God's blessing. Make room for it. We have a planning group working on the development of our site and facilities. God has blessed us but we were not ready for the blessing. Junior Church has 50 children and the rooms we have are bursting at the seams. This building is ideal for the Sunday School we had 60 years ago but it's not ideal for the activities we run today. The Lord has sent the blessing and we haven't made room for it. We need to learn that lesson and not make the same mistake again.

If you've been called to that working group you have a great opportunity to be part of the blessing the Lord is planning for Spon End. If you're not part of that group you have a great responsibility to pray for them.

This year the five year term of office for the Elders comes to an end. We need godly leaders who are listening to what the Lord is saying. Leadership comes with a price tag. There's a cost in terms of time. There's a cost in terms of criticism. It shouldn't be like that but it is. There's a cost in terms of family life. As the work expands we don't need less Elders; we need more.

During the early months of this year each of the current Elders will have the opportunity to reflect on the vision they shared with us five years ago, the progress they have seen and the sticking points. These will be evening services and I want us to be there and to be part of that opportunity to wait upon God and make appropriate plans for the future.

What we might call the management structure of the church is creaking as much as the building itself. The Elders have recently set up meetings with a representative of the Deacons and leaders of the departments – Junior Church, Toddlers, Thursday Fellowship, Outlook, Launch Pad, Youth Group, Missionary Council, Students. These people are at the sharp end of the church's work and yet up till now they have had no input into the meetings where policy is discussed and decisions are made, that is the Elders and Deacons meetings. We need to move towards a structure where teams which are responsible for areas of the church's life have a forum where their leaders can meet and liaise and make decisions.

If you say, 'That's not in the constitution,' then all I can say is it should be.

And then there's Spon End, the estate where our church is situated. There are vast needs here and over the past few years the Lord seems to have been saying very clearly, 'I'm not moving you away from here.' What facilities are needed to reach out to the young kids of Spon End, to show them that there is a God who loves them?

We've talked about increasing the salaried staff of the church. Can we afford to do it? If the Lord is going to bless us can we afford not to?

Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords. But, of course, there's more.

Strengthen your stakes

It's not enough to expand wider. We need to go deeper. There needs to be strength as well as growth. What are the tent pegs we need to drive home?

The Bible, God's word. Prayer. Fellowship. Encouragement. Personal integrity and morality. Faith.