

Fixing our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2)

Vaughan Roberts, 25 June 2019 at Emmanuel Church Wimbledon

Preface

I gave this address at Emmanuel Wimbledon and then again at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly in London. In both cases I was not chiefly addressing those who had been directly affected by Jonathan Fletcher's behaviours, but rather those who were hearing about them for the first time. If you are reading this as someone who has been more directly affected, or as a spouse or close family member of such a person, I want to acknowledge that I cannot presume to know how you may be feeling. It is my heartfelt prayer that, as part of all the support I very much hope you will receive, you too will find comfort and hope in fixing your eyes on Jesus.

We will have experienced a range of different emotions since we first heard the news about Jonathan Fletcher: shock, grief, anger, guilt, fear, taint and panic. In all of them we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help each other fix our eyes on Jesus.

Jesus: The Unchanging Lord

After, perhaps, initial disbelief, many of us have been hit by a deep sense of **shock** as the reality of what has happened has hit us. For some, especially those who have been at Emmanuel for a long time, it has felt that the very foundations on which their lives have been built have been shaken. Everything feels different and that is profoundly disorientating.

Of course it's true that a revelation of this kind does have a great impact on our perspective, not just on one minister, but on our church, our faith, even on life itself. But we must not let those feelings go completely unchecked. Much may seem to have changed, but Jesus hasn't. As the writer to the Hebrews says: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). He is absolutely dependable: always good, always loving, always faithful; he will never let us down. So, in our shock, we must fix our eyes on him, the unchanging Lord.

Jesus: The Compassionate Friend

There has been much **grief** over these last few days. Many tears have been shed, above all for those who have been most directly damaged by Jonathan's behaviour; and tears too for the damage to Christ's name and the reputation of his church. Some have likened the feeling to a bereavement.

In the midst of such deep sadness it is a great reassurance to know that we do not worship a distant, indifferent God, who sends his condolences by text. He came to earth in the person of his Son, who became fully human and experienced the whole range of human emotion, including grief. When confronted with the horror of death at the grave of a friend, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). So we can approach him, knowing that he understands. "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer". In our grief, let's fix our eyes on him, the compassionate friend.

Jesus: The Righteous Judge

We may well **feel angry** about what we have heard. There is no doubt that the behaviour that has been described is very wrong. Some will rightly feel a deep sense of indignation at the abuse of power involved. And the use of chastisement in pastoral ministry has no biblical warrant whatsoever; in fact it goes completely against anything Jonathan ever taught. How could he have possibly justified this perverse behaviour to himself, if indeed he did? What was he thinking of?

We may ask such questions, but we will never fully know the answers. But Jesus does and one day, when he comes to “judge the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1), all will be revealed and will be judged justly. In the meantime, we should resist the temptation to speculate on another’s motivations. We must be clear that what has happened has been deeply wrong and then leave the final judgment to the Lord. In our anger, we must fix our eyes on him, the righteous judge.

Jesus: The Gracious Saviour

It is not unusual for those who hear of another’s sin being exposed to **feel guilty** themselves. That may be because we have ourselves in some way been directly involved in what has happened. We should be clear that, assuming a significant imbalance of power, others involved should be regarded, not as complicit in what has taken place, but as victims. Guilt is not appropriate in these circumstances. But it may be that we feel at least partially responsible for some other reason. We wonder, perhaps, whether we should have noticed that something was wrong and intervened. It is remarkable that what has happened has taken everyone by complete surprise because these behaviours were somehow kept secret, so no one can be expected to have stopped them. But was there anything else that was more visible that should have been addressed? And are there elements in our particular culture that somehow mask, condone or even foster bad behaviour? These are certainly questions that we and others will need to face.

Sometimes it’s hard to work out whether the guilt we feel is appropriate or not. We may not even be able to work out where it comes from, but it has a powerful hold over us nonetheless. Rather than allowing ourselves to be dragged down by this feeling, we should take it to Jesus. He is the gracious saviour who, although without sin himself, died for our sins on the cross so that, through faith in him, we can be sure of God’s forgiveness. “The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7). So, in our guilt, we must fix our eyes on him, the gracious saviour.

Jesus: The great high priest

If we know our own hearts, in the midst of all the other emotions, we are bound to experience some **fear**. The fall of another should be a reminder of our own sin and folly. There, but for the grace of God, go I. We may not be tempted in the same way, but we too have the capacity to sink very low. It has happened before and it could happen again and, as a result, bring disgrace, not just to ourselves, but to Christ. This should make us fearful, but we should make sure we respond in the appropriate way.

In a blog post on “[How to respond when church leaders fall](#)”, Christopher Ash quotes the Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne: “*The falls of (professing Christians) into sin make me tremble. I have been drawn away from prayer, and burdened in a fearful manner by hearing or seeing their sin. This is wrong. It is right to tremble, and*

to make every sin of every professor a lesson of my own helplessness, but it should lead me more to Christ". He is the great high priest, who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses, having been tempted in every way during his earthly life. So, when worried about our frailties and fearful of how easily we could fall, we should "approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16). In our fear, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, the great high priest.

Jesus: The Chief Shepherd

We are bound to feel a sense of **taint** in the light of what has happened. What had seemed so good has been stained, perhaps irredeemably. A man we had admired and looked up to is now seen in a different light. And it may be that, not only he himself, but also the effects of his ministry, are tainted in our minds. We may now look with more jaded eyes at our conversion or Christian growth under his care and wonder if they are somehow discounted?

These feelings can go very deep, but we must not let them dictate to us without allowing the Bible to put them in perspective. Did we not already know that everyone, even those who appear most godly, are sinners? None of us has ever done anything with an entirely pure motive in our lives. That thought should, of course, banish from us any hint of self-righteousness. Even "our righteous acts are like filthy rags" in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6). And, wonderfully, the fact of our sin does not prevent God from using us. The same people are capable of doing both great good and terrible evil. Think of David, whose passionate love for the Lord is evident in his Psalms, and yet who committed both adultery and murder. Or Peter, who denied his Lord three times and then became a fearless leader of the church. Even when we act with wrong motives, such as Paul's rivals, who took the opportunity of his imprisonment to "preach Christ out of envy and rivalry" (Philippians 1:15), God may still use us.

The Bible warns us not to put our trust in princes (Psalm 118:9). We do both pastors and ourselves a great disservice when we put them on pedestals. Our focus must be on Christ, the chief shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4). In his grace he uses flawed under shepherds to point people to him through his word, but we should be in no doubt that our spiritual blessings come from him and not from them. They may be tainted but he, as the one who is without sin (1 Peter 2:22) is certainly not. With our sense of taint we must fix our eyes on Jesus, the chief shepherd.

Jesus: The Lord of the Church

When terrible things happen we may well feel a sense of **panic**. Everything seems out of control and we wonder how we can keep going. Whatever the human agency, we can be sure that the devil is also at work at such times, doing all he can to discourage and divide God's people, while confirming others in their opposition to Christ. It may look as if he is succeeding and be very hard to see signs of God at work, but we must not despair. There have been many scandals in the history of God's church, which have done terrible damage, but none has been able to stop the progress of the gospel. Christ has promised that he will build his church and "the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). In our panic, let's fix our eyes on Jesus, the Lord of the church.

The words "looking unto Jesus" in the old Authorised Version translation of Hebrews 12:2 were central to John Newton's understanding of his life and ministry. He wrote,

“Every step along the path of life is a battle for the Christian to keep his two eyes on Christ.” That is the battle we must fight together in the days ahead. We must not deny or ignore the powerful emotions we will experience at this time, but nor should we allow them to control us. Let us determine to keep “fixing our eyes on Jesus”.