

‘I SEE THINGS AS THEY NEVER WERE AND SAY WHY NOT’

Again and again the Bible tells how God speaks to His people through vision and dreams. They are respected and taken seriously as a way God reveals His secrets, His plans and purposes, and calls individuals to be part of working them out.

writes **John Hughes**

‘The secrets things belong to God, but the things He has revealed belong to us and our children for ever.’¹

It is a fundamental article of the faith is that we have a God who communicates to those He loves and has created in His own image.

There are over 130 references to dreams and visions in the Bible. ‘If we add together all references to dreams and visions and all the stories surrounding them, we would find a third of the Bible is related to the subject.’² The Bible records the dreams and visions of Joseph, Moses, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, Peter, and Pilate’s wife and many others. The Lord says to Aaron and Miriam that He makes himself known to prophets in visions and speaks to them in dreams.³

The Hebrew word for dream is ‘harlam’ and means ‘to make whole or healthy’. There are two ways we dream, during sleep which reflects inner feelings about our life or situation and when we’re awake, reflecting our longings or aspirations.

Joseph’s dreams of greatness, where



Build an altar on the threshing floor by **Mandy Patterson**

his father and brothers would bow down before him, revealed his destiny. However he needed a personal humbling and reshaping of his character before he could be trusted to fulfil those.⁴

Through a dream the dreamer learns something about his personal situation and is challenged to do something about it. Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream which troubled him in the night. For Nebuchadnezzar God was challenging his pride.⁵

Job reveals one of the purposes of a dream:

‘For God speaks in one way or two,

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though people do not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleeps falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens their ears and terrifies them with warnings.’⁶

God uses a dream or vision to awaken a person to the danger they are in and to change their attitude or lifestyle. Thus Nebuchadnezzar had a series of dreams which became more alarming (nightmares) because he ignored the message the dream was conveying.

Vision, on the other hand implies the

ability to see with an inner eye. It is associated with the ‘prophet’ who is called a ‘seer’. The prophets saw with an inner eye what God is doing and speaks it out.

Peter’s vision when he went up to pray on the rooftop indicates that he was in charge of his senses for he questions and argues with the voice in the dream. The voice calls him to eat food three times to break through his prejudices. The vision prepares him to take the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius something he would have never considered possible.⁷

The Bible’s understanding of dreams is that they are a normal experience

where the dreamer is reflecting on his own life and circumstances. Often God speaks to us in our sleep because we are more receptive and less defended.

The world of dreams and visions seems foreign to us today whereas in the Old and New Testament it is normal and familiar. Why is it that we are so unfamiliar with this experience in our lives? I believe in our western secular society we are largely dominated by our minds. However rationalism is only one means of knowing. GK Chesterton highlighted

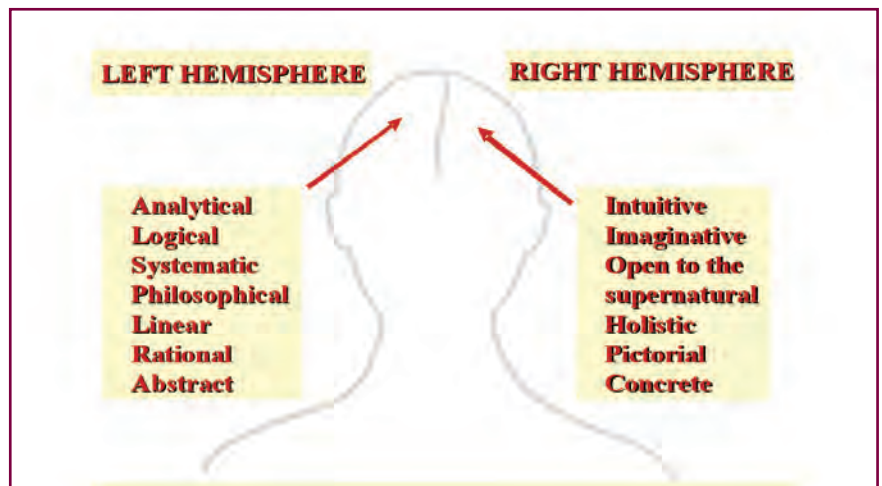
this when he said, 'there is a road from the eye to the heart that does not go through the intellect.' There is something fundamental to grasp if we are to understand the place that dreams and visions might play in God's economy. It is to distinguish between the mind and the heart. We know that the brain has two hemispheres which govern our thinking and knowing. The left hemisphere contains the cognitive functions to do with analytical, conceptual, rational and abstract functions. The right hemisphere includes the intuitive and imaginative aspects, the language of image. These are often pictorial and concrete, bypassing the mind to reach the heart. It is the right side of the brain that receives dreams and visions. It is here that the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, interpretation and dreams and visions.

Image opens us to dreams, visions and gifts of the Holy Spirit which often focuses on possibilities not obstacles

For healthy living we need to operate with both the mind and the imagination. Hugh Lavery⁸ pointed out that religious people have two languages available to them – the language of concept and the language of image. Much Christian teaching is couched in the language of concept, focussing on many of the doctrines of our faith. Yet Jesus more often preferred image to concept. His teaching abounds with images and stories that speak powerfully to the heart – they contain truth in pictures and parables.

Image opens us to dreams, visions and gifts of the Holy Spirit which often focuses on possibilities not obstacles. The prophet Joel looks forward to the era of the promise of the Spirit when God will pour out his spirit on all flesh, releasing prophesy, dreams and visions.⁹

GK Chesterton said something enormously helpful, 'you see things as they are and ask why, I see things as they never were and say why not.' All of us have the capacity to dream – to see possibilities which do not yet exist coming into being. The Psalmist often reveals his capacity to dream



– to see what could be, we were like those that dreamed.¹⁰

One of the most significant verses in my ministry has been Nathan's word to David 'Go and do what is in your heart for God is with you.'¹¹ This arose out of a dream David had of building God's house. That permission giving to step out and trust his heart has been very significant to me in fulfilling dreams that God has given for the Church.

It encouraged us as a church at St Andrew's High Wycombe to step out in faith and build a new church, seeing God multiply resources in finance and manpower. At significant moments we were given dreams and visions which encouraged us to trust God, to see a carpenter healed who had a serious fall, and to provide something like three quarters of a million pounds.

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Visiting Mozambique gave birth to a vision of connecting with our community in Harborne. This grew out of a prophetic word the Bishop gave me when starting at St John's in 1992. 'I would that St John's was known in the High Street and not as a large church around the country.' In Mozambique Annie and I were deeply challenged to see how a rich church could connect with the poor and disadvantaged in its community. This gave birth to the Crossway,¹² a centre which has five strands, Debt support, Crisis Pregnancy centre, Support for the elderly, Practical assistance in the community and Healing on the

streets. That vision has become a reality engaging St John's in its local community and its needs.

Thus the capacity to dream and to see what God is doing has been fundamental to growing a church that becomes an effective agent of God's mission in the world. **r**

End Notes

- ¹ Deuteronomy 29: 29
- ² Healing Dreams –The Power and purpose in your spiritual life Russ Parker, SPCK, page 8
- ³ Number 12: 6
- ⁴ Genesis chapters 37 & 41
- ⁵ Daniel chapters 2-4
- ⁶ Job 33:14
- ⁷ Acts 10: 3
- ⁸ (Hugh Lavery 'The Priest and Presence' in Spirituality and Priesthood 1983
- ⁹ Joel 2: 28
- ¹⁰ Psalm 126 'When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion we were like those that dreamed.'
- ¹¹ 2 Sam 7:3
- ¹² The Crossway see website [http:// www.stjohns-church.co.uk/](http://www.stjohns-church.co.uk/)

about the writer

The Revd Canon John Hughes has been in parish ministry for 43 years being Vicar of St Andrew's High Wycombe for 15 years 'where we saw the renewal of the church and built a new church'. He went on to become Vicar of St John's Harborne for 18 years retiring in 2009. John has been involved with New Wine since it started in 1989 and has spoken in many countries including New Zealand. He is married to Annie and they have three married sons and four grandchildren.

About the title painting

Mandy Patterson is a Christian artist from Wantage. Her painting is inspired by 1 Chronicles 21, when, after David's disobedience, God stops the Angel of Judgement from destroying Jerusalem. David is advised to build an altar on the threshing floor. Mandy says: 'I wondered what is the significance of worship on a threshing floor. Let us be like David, determined not only to offer costly sacrifices of praise, but gladly to be willing to love and worship our Lord God on the threshing floor that beats and shakes seeds from husks with all that could mean for the Church.' www.mandypatterson.co.uk