

Gathering Again... 5th September 2021

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[0 : 00] We're kind of feeling our way back, aren't we, with all this churchy kind of stuff. So I want to just share a few thoughts of this in kind of two halves, really, this morning. And we'll see where we go on this.

It's kind of winding back up in a way to being church again. And I'm aware for all of us, there'll be a whole range of feelings and opinions about just what this church stuff should be about.

Now, for some, this is all pretty new, this life here. Whether we've been at St. John's or in church in general, we may not have really done church before this morning.

And I appreciate that. You'll all have your own story if you are new to this whole church game as to what's drawn you here today. But there'll be a novelty to being here. Yes, some apprehension, maybe.

Also, perhaps some level of hope or expectation that whatever or whoever is drawn you here, that inner itch, if you like, for meaning and community and peace, I hope is that will be scratched in some way or other today and going forward.

[1 : 05] For others of us, though, well, if you've been past St. John's prior to the pandemic, you know, 18 months, two years ago, you may well be itching to get back to what we had and sort of feel like you're slipping back into an old pair of slippers or back into a comfortable chair this morning, you know.

Hope is that you'll find a familiar, enriching and comforting once again. You've missed it. Perhaps you've been with us before. You're hopefully glad to be back. Still, for others of us, though, we may well be feeling pretty conflicted or uncertain about this whole church thing, you know, about where this communal stuff fits in now to the new rhythms of life that we've been creating for ourselves, the different priorities, perhaps, that these last 18 months have brought us.

Maybe our habits, maybe our Sunday routines have changed. Maybe you've enjoyed watching YouTube in your pyjamas rather than getting dressed and coming down here. I don't know. You may have missed some of the aspects of what church is about.

But in other ways, you felt less busy, a bit freer, perhaps, without a routine, without the responsibilities, perhaps the social interaction that comes with this. Now, imagine there'll be a mixture, perhaps, of all of these kind of feelings for many of us.

It's a sense that, yeah, there's a novelty to being here again, which is nice. But we're also aware of the need to find our feet about what it means to be in this kind of gathering again. Because I don't know about you, I haven't been with this amount of people, really, very often at all in the past few months.

[2 : 39] I don't know if you were at the proms or whatever at Lishfield. People were saying that was a weird gathering as well, to be with people again in that kind of size crowd. This, I know, will be a strange experience for many of us.

And yet you stir in the sort of psychological, emotional, physical effects of the trauma that we've collectively experienced, and it has been traumatic these last 18 months. I wouldn't be surprised if you're just feeling a bit weird.

I'm feeling weird being up here for such a, you know, it's been a while. Almost like the sort of, you know, you wake up and you haven't had a good night's sleep, you feel that kind of fogginess in your mind sometimes.

I feel like that sometimes when you're a bit sleep deprived. You know, you can function, you're doing okay, but perhaps just being again with people, there's a sort of inability perhaps to concentrate or just feel relaxed as you want to be, to feel on form again.

I mean, we'll be aware, for example, of the outward awkwardness of the stage we're in. You know, when you come through the door, when you pop to Morrison's or whatever, do you put your mask on still or not?

[3 : 40] You know, do you shake people's hands? Are we doing this or do we don't? We do-to-do with a hug or a handshake. I think I've fist bumped people's elbows more than I'm into sort of in recent weeks. I'm not quite sure how to do it. All these outward signs of uncertainty that we're going through at the moment, I guess they reflect that inner uncertainty.

As well, that restlessness, that frustration maybe, and not quite being able to get back to what we would want life to be. That's all looking at things perhaps from how we're feeling at the moment, as we walk through the door, as we carry what we're carrying at the moment.

Quite an insular perspective, I suppose. But then as people of faith as well, or at least an openness to the idea of God, there's a much bigger, broader question for us as well.

Not perhaps how God fits in to what we've experienced and how we're feeling, but more how what we've experienced fits in to the bigger idea of God.

And so I wonder this morning, time for some reflection. What have we, or what have you perceived, what have you encountered?

[4 : 53] What of God, would you say, has spoken to you, has been revealed to you in perhaps new ways over the past 18 months or so?

How has God, or the idea of God, surprised or confused or disappointed or thrilled you in the past 18 months?

Thinking about the journey we've been on, what have you realised actually matters to you most in this time? Where have we felt perhaps God's presence most?

Because I doubt, and I probably wouldn't have been in this building, this morning's nice, yeah, but we haven't been here for 18 months really. Where else though in the world, as you go out and about, as you go on your walks and stuff, where else have you perhaps felt or sensed that bigger presence of God?

Somewhere tangible that's not building-based, but has perhaps been out and about in the world.

Where have you been touched by someone's act of kindness towards you?

[5 : 54] Where have you been sickened by social injustice that you've seen? Where have you been sorry perhaps at how you've behaved or how you've treated other people? And the good news is those range of feelings, whether it's a feeling peaceful or joyful, responding to kindness, getting worked up about injustice, that act of contrition maybe, that feeling sorry, they're all good feelings that we'll have been experiencing.

And since they're good, by definition, they're all rooted in God, since all good things flow from God. So God's not been absent these past 18 months just because we haven't been meeting as a church.

He's been in all of those good feelings. Whatever's pleasing, whatever's right, God has been present there with us, whether we've always realised it or not. And yet the better news is that the flip side is also true, so that even if we think our faith has floundered perhaps, if we've suffered, if we've grieved life, God's been with us, God's been with you in those times as well.

And Jesus himself says, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn. I've felt poor in spirit on and off these past 18 months. I've mourned these past 18 months.

I've grieved what we've lost, what we haven't had. But when Jesus says we're blessed in those times, that literally means God smiles on us in those times, not in a patronising smile, but in a caring, comforting smile.

[7 : 27] God envelops us, especially when we do feel distant, when we are floundering, when we have been feeling lost perhaps. Again, we may not always have realised it, but God's promise is to be with us, even in the toughest of times.

And you all know as well as me, it's been a tough 18 months. And so with that kind of thought, I know what you're thinking about perhaps at the moment, I want to ask some questions this morning, and we'll have a couple of minutes just to think these ones through.

So where are you at, would you say, in yourself? Peter Kay, where are you at in yourself? How are you doing in yourself? Where are you at in yourself? But where are you at with God, would you say?

Secondly, where would, or where do you want God to lead you from here? What would you like the future with God to be? And then thirdly, how do you picture a church, whether it's this one or another kind of gathering, how do you picture a church which refreshes you for the journey ahead? Three questions. How are you doing? Where do you want God to lead you? And where does church fit in to that? So three questions for a bit of reflection.

[8 : 46] I'm going to pause for a minute to give us a bit of space to think those kind of things through. But to help us actively process these, perhaps. Maybe don't just sit there in the position you are.

Either shift around your posture, you know, cross your legs, move around in your seat. If you want to swap seats with someone, do that. If you want to stand up, if you want to kneel down, if you want to go for a little wander, if you want to grab yourself a drink, if you want to talk quietly with the person next to you, if you're an external processor, if you want to get your phone out and write some thoughts in there for you to remember, just spend three or four minutes.

We won't put any music on. We'll just keep it quiet because a bit of quiet's nice. Just to think through these things, a bit of space together, but individually as well with God. So I'll leave us with these questions and then we'll think on a little bit further.

So a little bit of quiet to think things through. All right. I appreciate the big questions perhaps for us to unpack. I guess the first two are ones that we would keep on processing of ourselves or those closest to us as we go through life really.

And the third one is one I just want to maybe begin us to help think about this morning. We'll put these questions up again over coffee time and it might be that you want to continue perhaps conversations around these kind of questions as we go through.

[10 : 04] But I guess as we come together on a morning like this, you know, approaching God with all sorts of feelings and experiences that we've had, how might we work out over the coming weeks and months what it means to be a people of faith who have been dispersed and more individual for the past 18 months, but now want to come back together in a sort of communal, gathered way of being church.

Well, there's a particular story in the Bible which I think might be helpful for us this morning. It's a story from a period in the faith journey of the people of God from about two and a half thousand years ago.

It's an ancient story, but I think I'd say it remains particularly relevant for us today. And it concerns a group of people, the ancient Israelites, it's this people group who God had identified long ago as having a special role in helping the wider world to encounter and better understand God.

The Bible tells stories of how God provided these ancient Israelites with land to settle in, land in which they built a key city, Jerusalem, seen here from that time ago.

And in that city, they built a very special temple to worship God in. Well, despite their good intentions to worship and represent God in the world, these people of God are a bit like us.

[11 : 34] They mess up left, right, and center. The Bible's full of stories that they're messing up. And it results in their city of Jerusalem eventually being invaded by a foreign army from the province of Babylon.

The city of Jerusalem, including the temple that they built, gets trashed, the people get captured, and then the people get carted off, exiled in Babylon, which is modern-day Iraq, a good few hundred miles from where they were living.

However, a few generations after that, these exiled people were then allowed to return to Jerusalem from Babylon. And they attempted to restore their city, including rebuilding the temple again.

So, it's a long story in the Bible, and we'll sort of dip into it perhaps over the coming weeks. But these people, they've been isolated, they've been exiled, been away from their familiar surroundings for so long.

They changed as people in the process of that exile. They'd experienced new things. Their faith had been stretched or shaped in new ways. Some people of their community had died.

[12 : 41] Some people had drifted away and wouldn't return, whilst others over the years would have joined their community, who were perhaps unfamiliar with how things were in the past. So, after a period of exile, these people of God were now trying to work out how to be a community once again, which for me sounds quite familiar, really, with perhaps where we're at.

As I say, over the coming weeks, we're going to be exploring this story to see what lessons we might be able to learn from it as we find our feet as a church again. But for today, there's just one little episode in that story that I want us to consider briefly.

As I said, these exiled people returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, and they sought to rebuild their temple, you know, their center of worship. And the Bible tells us this, that many of the older priests and Levites, that's like assistant priests, and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. What's going on here? Well, for starters, it was clearly an emotional occasion for them to be back where they were, overwhelming, perhaps. And I don't know how you felt walking through the doors, how you felt perhaps when we were singing earlier.

Sure, for some of us, it is quite emotional to be back here. I know I've got to be up here, and I've got to hold it together in a way. I was, Jane was telling me, oh, it's quite emotional when she walked in. It's like, ah, don't get me going, because I won't stop otherwise.

[14:12] I'm not really a crier, but I was like biting my cheeks not to sort of well up at that point. It is emotional, I'm sure, for many of us to be back here. As I said earlier, it is weird, and there's an emotional drain which will come with that.

But the good news is, from this story, we can see that emotion of being back with what was once familiar, perhaps, is natural. What else? Well, some of the older heads, we're told, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid.

Now, we don't know if these tears were tears of relief because they were back, or tears of disappointment at how underwhelming this new temple was looking.

I suspect it was a bit of both, a bit of gratitude to be back, a bit of grief that it wasn't what it was. And maybe for you, you know, especially if you've been part of things at St. John's for a while, you'll know where there's me.

It's good to be back, but things are going to be a little bit different to how they were, at least for the time being. You may be disappointed singing in masks. It wasn't what we used to do, perhaps.

[15:19] And I know, it's a pain to wear the mask. It's the right thing to do, perhaps, at the moment. But it's different. You might think, I quite enjoyed St. John's being a tactile, huggy kind of church.

You may not have enjoyed that, but traditionally, St. John's has been a touchy-feely kind of place with lots of hugs and handshakes and that kind of thing. We're not so much doing that at the moment. We may well get back in time, but you might have missed that way to express yourself and greet people.

If you missed that, again, I get that. And yet, in the midst of any understandable disappointments, it is good to be here. We're starting off again. And we are beginning a journey back together.

So, it wouldn't be surprising to me if mixed feelings cause us to well up, perhaps. Maybe, not exactly weep aloud, because we're more restrained than that, but we'll be feeling emotional.

There'll be some way of our emotions being expressed. as the verse continues, it says that many others at the same time shouted for joy when they were back.

[16:20] Why were they shouting for joy? Well, partly, I imagine, that they were simply celebrating the present, you know, the freedom, the opportunity to gather again. But more than that, I suspect they were feeling joyful because it was only the foundation of the temple that was being laid.

It was their starter for 10, if you like. They knew there was a lot more to come. They could see the potential. They could begin to dream again of what might be possible.

They were shouting for joy. And it's early days for us here, I know, to get excited, tentative, all sorts of unknowns to come. But my hope, my prayer, I think, for us as a church is that slowly but surely, our excitement about a new future, which will be different, but hopefully a better future, might be nurtured by God as he leads us forward.

Let's talk practicals for a bit. On the newsletter that you've had when you come in or you've seen it online, there are various activities with start dates planned, more in the pipeline to come, new initiatives we're going to be doing too. And it's been good to have received a number of these forms back, these 90 ways to serve forms, which went out in a post to most folks.

We got copies outside in the foyer if you want, 90 odd ways for us to maybe pick and choose a bit at how we might want to get involved in the life of our church in serving others. And I've had a good number of those back, which is great.

[17:48] If you haven't got those back to me, can I encourage you to do so, please? If you're new, if you want to take one and have a think about what ways you might want to get involved, that would

be great. Makes it much easier for us to plan activities, especially with the children's groups, what's going to be possible going forward.

So get those forms back to me if you can. And even if you're not sure about the moment, the extent to which you want to be involved or what time you can offer, how comfortable you feel, that's okay. Stick your name on a form and say, I'm not sure, and that's okay.

And maybe we'll begin over the months to pencil you into some things as you feel ready to be involved at whatever level you feel is right for you. Above all I think though, my request I guess is that we use these coming weeks to seek God's guidance together for what to do and how to do it as a church.

What Sundays might look like, how we might encourage one another in following Jesus, how we might serve the needs of our community and beyond. That process of seeking God's guidance is going to be rooted in our worship, our prayers, our learning, but more than ever I think it's going to be rooted in the way that we share with one another, our conversations, our catch-ups, our coffee time, our time over food.

What does it mean to do life together and be church under God together? And I would love to hear your thoughts as we work out together what it means to be St. John's in this place in this time.

[19 : 13] I've got to say, it's not been easy these past 18 months. But I am more convinced than ever of God's faithful, loving kindness to us.

It's nerve-wracking to be starting again because I'm rusty as anything, I tell you. I need some WD-40 in my spiritual bones. And the future is not clear.

I've got no idea what's happening with schools and infections and all that. We'll see. We'll see what that brings. But I do know deep in my gut from all that I've seen the past 18 months and more that God's got us, God's got you, God's got me.

And as we journey on with God together, I know, as we sometimes sing, that all will be well. And I'm excited to be doing this journey with you.

I can't believe I do I? I can't believe I do not.

[20 : 24] And let's know what I want to know you You You You You You Do You You You You You You