

## Reflective Worship Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> Sept 2020

### Growing

A couple of weeks ago, Paul began his sermon by asking the question – “Who am I?” He went on to talk about identity, and how the disciples gradually came to understand who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Chosen one, the King, the Lord.

This evening, I want to ask a similar question. “Who are we?” Those of us gathered at St John’s, those watching on YouTube, those reading these words at home. “Who are **we**?”

Why are we here, taking part in this service? Why are each of us, individually and together, “doing church”? What even is “church”? What do we mean when we use that term?

It’s a question I’ve posed before, and one I’m sure I’ll ask again, because the answer is so important. And we’ve noted before that some answers might be a building, an institution, a social club, a group of people trying to do the right thing, “what we do on Sunday morning” (or whenever our ‘service’ is.)

And yet we don’t read about any of those things in the stories of the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, or in the letters written to them by the early leaders.....

Listen to/read this passage from Acts 2, where we hear of a people of joy and of welcome...

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

People of hope and joy and commitment – who knew that they belonged to God, and whose lives and actions were motivated by the stunning truth that the Living God loved and welcomed them.

And isn’t that what we aspire to be? Perhaps this is what we could use as our definition of ‘church’ – that we are, and are becoming ‘people of hope and joy and commitment – who know that we belong to God, and whose lives and actions are motivated by the stunning truth that the Living God loves and welcomes us.’

Over the past three Reflective Worship services we have talked about how we – the church - worship, how we care for each other and how we show God’s care and concern for the world. Today we are thinking about how we grow, both as individuals and as a community – how we grow into being that picture of “church”.

Our prayer for growth asks God to help us to

“....grow in numbers,  
in spiritual commitment to you,  
and in service to our local community”

And exactly how we do that, in these strange times, is something that we probably need to work out together, so let's spend a few minutes thinking about each of these aspects of growth in turn

### **Growing in numbers....**

I guess this is what we often think about, when we think about growth.

So – some questions. Who do we count? Do we have boundaries?

Do we consider our Messy Church families to be part of church? The people to whom we deliver magazines? Those who bring their children for christening? Our funeral contacts, and those who come here for weddings? Our 'non-church-going' family members who have sat alongside us as we join in Morning Worship from home? How do we “grow” our mindset, to encompass all these people who are in some way seeking after, or seeking after more, of God? And welcome them, and support them on their journey?

What might it mean to us if we did grow in numbers? Last weekend Paul and I took part in a service which in normal times would have taken place at the Greenbelt Festival, but this year was posted on to YouTube. We'd like to share with you the opening words of the liturgy:

Is the body of Christ here?

**Yes.**

**In the food and drink that nourish us,**

**In mystery beyond understanding,**

**In us as we gather**

**In Spirit and truth.**

A: The body of Christ is broken, whole, divided, united, confused, certain, alien and familiar.

B: The body of Christ is young, old, black, white, privileged and disadvantaged.

A: The body of Christ is disabled, surviving, thriving, straight, LGBTQI, ill, well, mysterious and triumphant.

B: The body of Christ is joyful, angry, sad, disillusioned, depressed, content and full of hope.

A: The Body of Christ is at home, homeless, in hospital, in prison, outdoors and indoors, shielding and frontline, settled and unsettled.

Is the body of Christ here?

**Yes.**

**In the food and drink that nourish us,**

**In mystery beyond understanding,**

**In us as we gather  
In Spirit and truth,  
Behold the body of Christ.**

What would it be like if the Body of Christ in this place became like this? A former Vicar of mine is in the habit of saying that every time someone new joins a church, that church changes. What sort of changes might we experience? How prepared for them are we? What sacrifices are we prepared to make so that others might experience more of God?

And just how do we 'grow in numbers'? Do we have to have stunning intellectual arguments to prove the existence of God and force others into belief? (Hint: I think not!) Are we all evangelists? No. Are we all called to be witnesses of our experience of the Living God? Well, yes we are. In actions, and.... when appropriate... in words too.

Which brings us on to.....

### **Growing in spiritual commitment**

My grandson was one year old yesterday. How time flies! One year ago he was, if not a tiny scrap, at least a helpless baby. His entire existence was focussed around sleeping, feeding, crying, nappy changes and the like. Like all new-borns, he couldn't even focus his eyes. Today, he has a varied diet, is almost walking and is beginning to get the idea of language. The change is immense. And clearly that's most obvious in a new-born, but it applies to us all. Growth and change is part of life. We have all changed over the past year, our experiences change us. We see familiar things in different ways. [If we look around this lovely garden at St John's, even the mature trees and plants will have grown this year. New shoots. New leaves. New ways to reach towards the life giving light. And beneath our feet – new roots, digging further into the ground, seeking out nutrients, increasing their stability.]

And our faith also needs to grow and change. God is bigger than we can ever imagine. One of my favourite pictures of God is that of a beautiful diamond, with multiple facets. As we move round the diamond, we see different facets – all part of God, all casting light on our experience of life in a slightly different way. Sometimes one facet is more prominent, sometimes it is hidden completely. If our view of God is "stuck" on one facet, then we will miss the others – and maybe one of the others is exactly what we need to help us to work through the challenge of our daily life.

[Sadly some of the trees here are not growing. They are becoming unstable and insecure.] If our view of God is entirely based on him answering our prayers in the way we want – what happens to our faith when we don't get the answer we expect? For some it is the impetus to ask why, and to explore further. To move deeper into God. For others it is a stumbling block which they never get over, and their faith withers and maybe fails entirely.

I'm sure we all know the ways in which we can grow and learn. Prayer. Reading the Bible (with notes!). Joining a small group. (Maybe think of it as a book club, with the Bible as the book!) Reading or tuning in to our Midweek Reflections. Trying some of the ideas that

people have shared in the Parish magazine. Taking part in Way of Discipleship, or Moving On, or START. The more we talk with God, the more we talk about God, the more we will come to know God.

And if we think that either we already know all we want to, or that we have nothing to offer – a couple of one sentence stories.

Many years ago I went to the Bible study group which ultimately brought my faith to life because I thought I knew quite a lot about God and that the people there would benefit from my knowledge. Instead, I discovered that I knew a whole lot about God – but they actually knew God – and that that was a whole different ball-game.

Secondly – a couple of years ago I was part of a study group led by a minister who I greatly respected. I made a comment which to me wasn't at all remarkable (in fact, I thought it was probably rather silly.) To my astonishment, the study group leader said that the thought was really helpful to them in working through something they had been struggling with.

We all have things we can learn AND things we can offer. Pursuing our own growth benefits the whole church.

### **And thirdly, growing in service to our local community**

And this one is very brief, for on the one hand we are very good at supporting both the Foodbank and Adavu; EcoChurch is changing the way we think about our environment; and we do loads of work with schools.

And on the other hand, perhaps now, whilst so many of our activities are on hold, is a time to think about other needs in the community. Could more of us support Jimmy Tots in their work with pre-school children and their carers? Do we have a role to play in addressing the epidemic of loneliness and isolation that so many people face? How do we support young people in the challenges they face, not least in terms of their mental health? Where is God calling us to bring light and hope and good news to this parish and its people?

So very, very many things to think about. The challenges seem vast and overwhelming, and our resources seem so small.

And yet – we began this sermon by thinking about who Jesus is. The Messiah. The Christ. The one who turned water into wine. Fed 5,000 families from 5 loaves and two fish. Died for us and rose again. We believe he is our king, our Lord, our leader; and that we are his people. As we trust him – together; love him – together; grow with him – together – we will find we too can do more than we can possibly imagine.

And grow into becoming even more a 'people of hope and joy and commitment – who know that we belong to God, and whose lives and actions are motivated by the stunning truth that the Living God loves and welcomes us.'

