

Looking forward

Last week's service was my anniversary at St Ives, and here I am today being commissioned as this congregation's pastor. My first service was a bit smaller than this one – because my first service was during a Covid lockdown, and there was just Lawrence to introduce me, and John to video the service. It was not how one would hope to begin ministry with a congregation.

But it worked, though I got to know people a bit more slowly than I would have in normal times. I phoned people – and people phoned me – and I met people as they arrived here to record part of our services.

And so we travelled through the lockdown, with John faithfully videoing our services and uploading them to YouTube until eventually we could gather for worship – though we still couldn't sing together, and morning tea was out of the question. Until the time of Covid, I hadn't realised how important those two things were. St Ives – and most churches – adapted quickly to having to do worship online. We could listen to a bible reading, a sermon and some prayers, and we could even listen to some hymns. But what was missing were those things that we, as the people of God, do together. We wanted to be together, to praise God in song together, and we wanted to have fellowship together - the casual fellowship that we have over morning tea.

And sure enough, things progressed: as restrictions eased we were able to gather together, and then we were able to sing, and then, finally, we were able to have morning tea together. As I've spoken to people from other churches in recent times, I've realised that here at St Ives Uniting we have been blessed in how we've travelled through the times of Covid. Many churches have lost many members – they've just stopped going to church. Some of them may be following a church on-line, but it seems many are not.

Over the last year, it has been my privilege to become part of the fellowship and friendship that exists here. Beth and I have been welcomed into the St Ives Uniting community. And you've now called me to be your Pastor.

I guess the last year has been a bit like an engagement. We started off thinking we might like each other – and it turned out that we did. Encouraged by the life and witness exercise at the end of last year, we talked about it with PRC, and moved toward St Ives being identified as an appropriate placement for a Pastor, and me being commissioned as that Pastor.

After the engagement, of course, comes the marriage. We're signing up for a future together. We have a commitment and we have some certainty.

When I was getting married, I was given some advice. Well, I was given a lot of advice, but one piece of advice stood out. "Treat your wife like your girlfriend" – I initially thought it was going to be a joke, with the punchline being "And make sure they never meet". But it wasn't – it was just "Treat your wife like your girlfriend". So... don't expect your new wife to do all your washing, or cook all your meals and so on. And continue stuff like going out to dinner and celebrating special occasions. And so on.

And so, as I move from being "Lay Ministry Leader" here to being "Pastor", there's a lot that won't change. I'll still do all those things that I've done. The thing that changes, though, is our future together. We can look forward together, and go into that future together. To grow – hopefully in numbers, and hopefully in our knowledge and love of God. Maybe not quite 'until death do us part' – but for a good several years!

Often people getting married think in terms of ‘do we love each other enough to get married?’ but the thing that people should be thinking about is ‘how much will we love each other’. And I think that’s how we need to think about our congregation.

I’m not planning to put my feet up, and say “I’m Pastor here, now”. And hopefully you as congregation are not going to say “Well, we’ve got a Pastor now. Our ministry needs are sorted out. We can put our feet up.”

The congregation here is doing well. We’ve come through the times of Covid – although they’re certainly not over yet. We enjoy our fellowship in all its forms. We pray for each other. We do good things beyond our walls. We engage with the community. We support the wider church.

But we can’t be complacent. We can’t put up our feet.

The church in Philippi, the original recipients of our second bible reading today was doing quite well, too. It wasn’t like the other churches which were the subject of Paul’s letters which were struggling with particular issues, so as Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, rather than focus on teaching them about what is wrong, Paul was encouraging them, and he openly shared his joy and hope with them.

The Philippians were an established Christian community at the time – Paul addresses his letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (1:1). It was written to a whole community - quite likely a collection of what we might call congregations - who collectively, made up the church in Philippi.

Despite the joy and hope shared in his letter, we need to realise Paul was in prison in Rome at the time he wrote it. Now it might not have been that bad as 1st century prisons go – and Paul was certainly able to have attendants and send and receive messengers, but he was under arrest, he was deprived of his freedom, and he was in fear for his life. Roman justice may have been a bit flexible at the edges, but it was also very harsh, and while it might have provided privileges, it certainly had no place for mercy or compassion.

So as we read Paul’s letter to the Philippians today, we need to remember where Paul is, how he regards the church in Philippi – with love and joy – and the intention of the letter – it’s encourage, not admonish.

At the end of chapter 1, Paul tells the Philippians (and us, too) to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27), and then concludes with “And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” (1:29-30)

And so, because, like the Philippians, we have the privilege of being followers of Christ, we should be living our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel too – so that we can be good examples of the good news. Because of that, Paul says:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then

make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (2:1-2)

Paul is asking them to make his own joy complete, and he tells them that they can do this by being one in spirit and of one mind (so, having the same goals, the same vision), sharing in the same love, being in one mind.

It's a great vision for a church isn't it? In fact, it's a great vision for our church here in St Ives, isn't it? A group of people, individuals, but coming together as the body of Christ, using their gifts and sharing their gifts!

It's a great vision, but it's also a bit daunting. We are individuals, and it's natural for groups of people to compete, rather than cooperate. To push others down in order to push ourselves up. To put ourselves first.

But Paul tells us we need to change that: He says "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (2:3-4)

People sometimes say that there's Jesus' teaching on one hand, and Paul's teaching on the other. I don't think that's the case at all, and I think this passage is a great example of Paul's teaching reflecting Jesus own teaching. This is sermon on the mount stuff!

Jesus says: Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to the needy, do not store up treasures, don't judge others, and Paul continues: don't be selfish, put others first.

Paul tells us not to put ourselves first, not to work to make ourselves look good. But instead, be humble, put others first, look after others. Support our sisters and brothers in Christ. And of course, you'll be supported by them. So our church, instead of being a gathering of individual people with an interest in Jesus, becomes not just an organisation, but the very body of Christ.

It's big challenge. But Paul tells us we can look to the example of Jesus: "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:" says Paul, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!." (2:6-8)

That's what Jesus did. Jesus – God the Son – humbled himself. He became truly human. He became a servant. He gave himself up and people killed him. And the result of Jesus humbling himself, becoming a servant, and dying for us is what Paul tells us about next: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (2:9-11)

And friends, that is the hope that Paul looks forward to, the completion of God's plan for the world, and Paul urges the Philippians to complete their salvation. Not to be complacent with what they have, but to look forward.

And that's what we need to do too – complete our salvation. Not to be complacent with what we have, but to look forward.

And while we often think about salvation as 'being saved when we turn to Christ', and that is a good and correct view, for example we read in Ephesians "... because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:4-5)

But as well as view, Paul also talks about salvation as a process – for example in 1 Corinthians he writes "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

And so it is with us, as we look forward together, as we go forward together, as a congregation, as the people of God, as the body of Christ here in St Ives: our challenge is the same as that Paul told the Philippians of: being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility we need to be valuing others above ourselves, and not looking to our own interests but each of us to the interests of the others. And in all of that, we need to have the same mindset as Jesus himself, who humbled himself for our sakes.

Today is an important day. It's an important day for me. But it's also an important day in the life of our congregation here. We can look forward together, to a future we can share – share with each other and share with those around us, and ultimately look to a time when at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen