

PSALM 122

Preaching at St Saviour's Retford

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I wonder what you make of church at the moment. One opportunity the pandemic gave us was the opportunity to visit other churches from the comfort of our own homes. I think we dropped in here once. One of the nice things about being in a different church from our usual is that we get ideas for different ways of doing things, we get to meet new people and so on. And sometimes when we go back to our own church it makes us a bit sad to be back because things aren't as shiny and smooth as we saw elsewhere, and sometimes it makes us really happy to be back.

The pandemic has really shaken us. It means that we still can't do all that we used to do. It means that even being back at our home church feels a bit like being somewhere strange and not quite as good. And the verse that keeps coming to mind with that is in Haggai 2 where the people have managed to rebuild and reopen the temple, but it's

nowhere near as impressive as it used to be, and God says to them “Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?”

And I think this Psalm has something important to say to that.

We’re going to look at it under two headings, two things that the Psalm calls us to do.

First, Rejoice in the Church – **Rejoice in the Church.**

The songs of ascent go through a sequence; a cycle of three. In the first one, the Psalmist expresses a problem. In the second, he brings it to God and the problem seems smaller. In the third, he is with God and the problem is sorted. And because these Psalms were written and used for pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it’s not just with God but with his people too, and that’s where the focus is in this Psalm.

One thing I sometimes find really off-putting about people who rejoice in the church is that often they focus on saying

how amazing the church is for its own sake, which is kind of missing the point. You know, boasting about how many people turned up to your Christmas services or how amazing your online presence is or how many tens of thousands you just spent on cameras that automatically pan and focus on the speaker or whatever.

And it's easy for cynical folk like me to get deeply suspicious of churches that blow their own trumpets and miss the real value of rejoicing in the church. Because the Psalmist here unashamedly rejoices in the gathering of God's people, but he doesn't do it because of the buildings or the architecture, though the temple in Jerusalem was spectacular. No – he rejoices in the gathering of God's people because he rejoices in God.

God isn't obviously the main focus of this Psalm, it's more about God's people when they gather. But it's rejoicing in God's people because they are God's people, not because they are amazing in themselves. It's not that we've got these Olympic athletes and these university professors and these TV presenters. It's that we are children of God.

And we see the focus on God right at the start, right at the end and right in the middle of the Psalm. It begins and ends with describing the temple as “the Lord’s house”, and in the middle it describes the people as “the tribes of the Lord” and that their gathering is “to give thanks to the Lord”.

But that can actually be a real encouragement to us today. The church is amazing, but not because of what we’ve done, or haven’t done. And not because of the quality of our music or buildings. We’re amazing because of the identity of our God, and because we are his people. And God’s identity and his greatness don’t change because we can’t sing together.

So the Psalmist rejoices in the church and in the gathering of God’s people because of who God is. He is excited about being part of it because of who they are meeting together to worship.

But also because of the unity they experience together in worship. I think that’s what’s going on in v3. The phrase “in beautiful order and harmony” is very similar to the phrase where it says that the tabernacle is made of pieces all

connected together. I think it's talking about the crowds and the bustle at festival time; that everyone is connected and in beautiful order, even though they come from different places and different tribes.

He rejoices in the diversity of God's people, not naturally in harmony, sometimes even at war, but gathering together and mingling in the same crowd as they come together to worship God.

I guess the feeling this is closest to for me is going to a big concert or stadium. I remember going to a Christian conference at the Albert Hall in London, and there were all these people coming together from lots of different places and backgrounds and churches and even countries, all to worship God and listen to his word.

He rejoices in the church because of the God they meet together to worship, and because of the unity in diversity he brings between the many different people who come to worship him.

And I wonder about us. Do we need to recover some of that thrill and excitement about church, or maybe even get it for the first time?

Not thrill and excitement because the services are amazing, or because the people around us are wonderful, but because of the privilege that it is to meet together to worship the God who made the universe and who calls us his beloved children? To gather together with others of different cultures and backgrounds and ages to praise the God who gives us unity? To meet together in spirit, if not in person, with people from all over the world today, from hundreds of tribes and languages and people and nations to praise our great God and saviour.

To be an anticipation of heaven itself; not saying that wonderful perfection can be measured on these scales, but on that day when we finally see God clearly, and he wipes every tear from our eyes, we will worship him together and what happens now might be hindered in all kinds of ways due to sin and brokenness and the virus and it is just a tiny very imperfect foretaste, but it is a foretaste nonetheless.

And Alec Motyer points out that when we see a tiny sliver of a crescent moon in the sky, we still point to it and say “that’s the moon”. Even so, when we see a tiny sliver of God’s people gathered to worship him, we can say “that’s the new Jerusalem”. Not in full, but in part.

And maybe therefore also we need to stop disrespecting church as it is now. Yes, there are lots of ways we can improve and it’s important to try to do so, as we’ll see in a minute, but at heart the church is something utterly beautiful, because the heart comes from God. As Andy Hawthorne says from time to time. Don’t disrespect the church; yes she may have zits, but she’s still the Bride of Christ.

And it means we need to learn to rejoice in the other Christians who are here, maybe even and especially those who are different from us. If there’s someone who is a different culture or ethnic background here – that’s wonderful, that’s a taste of heaven, and we should be seeking to make them as welcome as possible. I remember I was in South Korea one Sunday, and I went to a local

church; it was all in Korean, which I don't speak, and afterwards the pastor apologised to me in English that there wasn't any translation service at their church. And I replied that being with loads of Christians of a different culture, with me as the only white person in the room, was a taste of heaven.

It's the same for people of a different social class from us or a different age from us. All of them add to the wonder and diversity of being part of God's people. All of them should be welcomed and valued and when we welcome them well, all of them add to the beautiful order and harmony here.

Notice by the way that it is the job of the majority to make the minority feel welcome, not the job of the minority to behave in the ways expected of them by the majority.

And so we are called to rejoice in the church.

Second then, we're called to **pray for the church**. And there's lots of different angles to this, but they are summed up in the word "peace", which is partly a pun on the name "Jerusalem" which means "city of peace".

And I'd like to draw out three aspects of this peace which the Psalmist alludes to.

It's peace that comes from submission to the prince of peace. Repeated words are really important in this Psalm, and there are three repetitions of "peace" coming straight after the two of "thrones". And v5 is odd, coming straight after the high point of v4 where the people gather to praise the name of the Lord, why on earth does it say "Here the kings of Israel sat to judge their people"?

The answer is that the Psalmist is celebrating the order that comes from submitting to the rule of God's chosen king. And the king's judgment and rule is what leads to peace in v6-9. Peace among God's people comes from all of us learning to kneel at his throne, and submit to his rule. It's not the kind of peace when everyone comes round to agree with me; it's peace where we all agree to submit to God.

It's also peace in several different directions. It's "peace inside your walls" in v7 – getting along well with others within the church, but it's also "safety in your palaces" – it's

in relationship with those outside the church. And yes, that means there will sometimes be opposition, but we're safe together in Christ.

But it's also peace that seeks prosperity; the classic Old Testament picture of peace is everyone being able to sit down under their own vine and fig tree.

And all of those mean that it's not the kind of fake peace that comes from papering over cracks or putting a nice face on things or failing to speak up when there's something seriously wrong. As anyone who has been in a healthy marriage or a long-term successful company knows, that isn't real peace. Peace between people is not the complete absence of conflict; it's handling conflict well, learning to speak the truth in love, and also receive the truth in love because we recognise that it's not ultimately about us or our own convenience; it's about acting for the sake of our family and friends v8, and for the sake of the house of the Lord v9 – doing conflict well for the sake of God's kingdom.

So once again, what about us? When we see yet another church argument on the news, when we feel annoyed with our brothers or sisters, do we pray for the peace of God's people? Because we are constantly under attack; Jesus himself prayed that his people would be united, and the devil loves to try to divide us. Do we pray for the peace of God's people?

When we find ourselves in arguments with others in the church, whether they are heated arguments with tempers high, or whether they are the kind of slow destructive cold war that isn't any better, do we pray for the peace of God's people? Remembering that the peace that matters isn't us winning; it's us both learning to submit to God properly, and to see one another as brothers and sisters and learn to live together and value one another.

Do we act for the peace of God's people? Not stirring up unnecessary conflict, and when conflict is needed not shirking from it, but instead seeking to do it well and lovingly for our long-term good and prosperity?

And when we've messed up or hurt others in the church, are we willing to swallow our pride and admit our fault, recognising that our mission to the world and the wellbeing of our friends and family is far more important than our own feelings.

I've chaired a lot of PCC meetings now, and the best ones aren't where there is no conflict; it's been where there is conflict, and we've listened respectfully to one another, and ended up agreeing together on a way forwards. And that's possible only when we keep on remembering that the church is not our church; it's God's church. Did you notice that throughout? The Psalmist doesn't claim that it is his people or his city, even though if the Psalm is by David, he has a right to say that. He says it is the Lord's house, God's people. Not ours.

Brothers and sisters, let us love the church. Let us love one another despite what we are often like because of who God is and what he has done for us. Let us love one another by

praying for one another, even and especially those we do not naturally get on with. And let us love one another not just in words, but also in actions, by seeking the good of the church. Because it's God's people. And it's a joy and privilege to be a part of it.