

‘A LETTER TO ST MARK’S CHURCH FROM HER PASTOR’
DECEMBER 13, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

I don’t know about the rest of you, but I feel pretty tired. A few weeks ago Pat and I had a conversation about how we were both feeling and we agreed that we were both mid-December tired. It was mid-November at the time. I had another conversation a few weeks ago with a woman who works as a counsellor and she was saying that, in her judgement, pretty much everyone is operating at about 75% of their normal emotional energy right now. And that resonated with me as well.

It’s been a tiring year hasn’t it? There’s been so much change and uncertainty to deal with. There’s been lots of anxiety to manage- our own, as well as the anxiety of others. There’s been deep disappointments as we’ve had to grieve the things we’ve missed out on. There’s been isolation- a blessing for some, but a difficult endurance for others. For many of us there has been more time spent at close quarters with those we live with- and that has come with real joys, of course, but also real challenges and frustrations. And for we who are part of a family in Christ, there has been the deep impact on our fellowship that this year has brought. So many gatherings we’d normally enjoy have been cancelled. For such a long time we were only seeing each other on a screen, and some of us weren’t seeing each other at all. And even now we can’t sit close to each other, or greet one another with a hug, or wander around and say hi to everyone we’d like to. There’s been a lot to deal with.

But there’s also been a lot to learn. Because, as always, God has been at work in us this past year to teach us. There have been things he’s wanted us to learn about ourselves. But also things he’s wanted us to learn about him, and about his purposes for us. That’s certainly been true for me. Of course, even this takes it out of us. But just because it’s tiring, doesn’t mean it isn’t spiritually productive.

When we first found out back in March that we would have to suspend our normal Sunday services, our church leaders had to move quickly to invent some other way of sharing fellowship and gathering around God’s word. Thus the birth of our YouTube channel, the reconfiguration of Pat & Issy’s lounge-room into a studio, the rapid learning of new technologies and new skills- like speaking into a camera, and our shared adjustment to live-streamed church. At the same time most of our other groups and meetings went online as well, and we had to work out how to make Zoom work for fellowship, and discussion, and prayer. And like most other people I think my expectation at the time was that we would have to do all this for a number of weeks, maybe a couple of months, but after that things would probably go back to something like normal.

But it didn't take too long before it started to become clear that this was going to be a longer deprivation than we first thought. And it was going to require a longer patience.

And it was not long after that realisation dawned on me, that I came across Psalm 126. I read it in the Bible one day and it really captured my attention and my imagination. This is what it says:

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

It's a psalm about the joy of God's deliverance. In its original context, I suspect the psalmist was reflecting back on the joy of returning from exile or something like that. And he describes it as God 'restoring the fortunes of Zion'- Zion being the mountain of God in Jerusalem. And the psalm reflects on how good it was to see God do this. It was like something you've dreamed about coming true. It led to grateful laughter, and deep joy. And it led people to see and remark on the kindness of God- the God who had done this great thing, amidst many great things. That's the first half of the psalm.

But the second half of the psalm is less a song of praise and more of a prayer. But it's nevertheless a prayer brimming with confidence. It's a prayer that God would do what he had done before. The psalmist prays that as God had delivered previously, so he would do so again. That he would continue to work to restore the fortunes of his people- like a river in a desert, like people crying with grief finding joyful song, like a farmer who starts out with just seed to sow but who finishes with more wheat than he can carry.

I love the poetry of the psalm. Its imagery is incredibly evocative. And it speaks to the power of God to transform not only the circumstances of his people, but also how they feel. And

that's mostly why I love these words- because of the theme of hope that seeps out of every crevice of the psalm.

So it wasn't long after I read this psalm earlier this year that I started fantasising about preaching from it on our first Sunday back at church. We were probably a couple of months into our live-streaming Sundays by this point and I began to imagine the day when we would return and I could preach this psalm to you. It seemed to me to be perfect for the occasion.

This is how I imagined it in my head. Maybe it would be mid to late August. We'd let you know that we were going to return to church this coming Sunday. We'd also let you know that we were going to take a break from our normal sermon series so I could speak to this moment of great celebration. Everything would be back to normal. We'd be meeting in the church building. People would embrace one another on the way in. We'd be jammed in next to each other in the pews. We'd sing our hearts out with happy praise. And then I would stand and share this psalm with you all- a joyful psalm for a joyful day, a psalm about deliverance on a day we felt wonderfully delivered.

So I kept reading Psalm 126. I memorised it and recited it many times. I kept dreaming, like the psalmist dreamed. But even before I knew the day I was hoping for wasn't likely to arrive, I came to realise I couldn't preach this psalm the way I wanted to. Because the more I read it and reflected on it, the more clear it became to me that God didn't give me this psalm to preach to you. Instead, he gave it to me to rebuke me for my tiny hopes and joys. And rebuke me he did.

You see the more I read it, the more I started to ask myself some uncomfortable questions. Is the return to church as we knew it the same kind of thing as what the psalmist was talking about here? Is being delivered from the effect of a virus on the life of our church really like being delivered from the judgement of God in the exile? Is returning to Sunday gatherings really on a par with returning to your city and your home after you've lived in foreign captivity for many years? I know that God giving us back normal St Mark's gatherings would be a good thing. But would it be a 'great' thing in the way the Psalmist uses the word 'great'?

And that led to some even more uncomfortable questions. What am I most looking forward to? Have I pinned my hopes on a return to church as we knew it when there are much more important things to hope for? What am I dreaming about? A Sunday when we would know the joy of a sweet reunion? Or a day when the fortunes of God's people will be restored far more wonderfully- a day when tears really will turn to lasting joy?

Of course, my hopes and dreams were full of something good. I dreamt about a reunion, and I dreamt about preaching this psalm to you all for good reasons- because I love our church, because I love the warmth of our fellowship, and because I felt its loss keenly. God wasn't

rebuking me for any of that. But he was rebuking me for my narrow vision. He used this psalm to show me that my hopes and joys were too small.

My hopes were too small because there are far greater things to look forward to than the restoration of our fellowship- as good as that is. And God used this psalm to remind me to pray and look for his great work in the world- bringing people to himself, uniting people to his Son, breathing new life into people by his Spirit. And God used the psalm to remind me to hope for the day when he will set everything right, when perfect justice will roll like a river, when the kingdom seed becomes a full harvest, when deprivations, and griefs, and anxieties, and viruses, and even death will be no more, when every tear will be transformed into songs of joy. God used the psalm to remind me that a day is coming when we really be like those who dreamed, when our mouths really will be filled with laughter, and when it really will be said all over the earth, and throughout heaven- "the LORD has done great things for them".

And in this way I learnt not only how small my hopes were, but also how small were my joys. Because even if we had never been able to meet together again, and even if we never do return to Sundays in the church, hugging each other at the door, singing shoulder to shoulder with voices loud- will we not still have much to rejoice in? Have we not had, every single day of this grief-filled year, more to be joyful about than we could possibly express? Is it not always and irreversibly true that God has done great things for us? Great things! He has washed our sins away. He has adopted us into his family. He has given us his precious word to cheer, and comfort, and rebuke us. He has given us each other to love and encourage each other no matter whether we're meeting together on a Sunday or not. He has given us his promise of the sweet, sweet day to come for which we hope. He has assured us that between now and then he will be at work in us, and at work through us to grow his kingdom. He has already restored our fortunes. He has already delivered us. He has done great things for us. He has. Great things. Done.

The hymn 'To God Be The Glory' captures well what I'm saying. Let me remind you of the third verse of that hymn:

'Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
but purer and higher and greater will be
our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father thro' Jesus the Son,
and give him the glory, great things he has done!'

Back on March 22 in our very first live-streamed service I encouraged us all not to just hope for things to go back to normal, not to allow our hearts just to want these difficult days to be over. Instead I urged us all to hope for the things Christ has given us to hope for through the gospel. My experience since that day is that, for me at least, that has been easier to say but harder to do. Maybe I'm just a slow learner. But God has certainly used this year to show me how quickly my hopes and joys can sometimes shrink. He's used this year to remind me that he has already given me many reasons for overflowing joy. And he's used this year to show me again that he has given us a hope that outstrips every other hope. And in particular he's used this psalm.

And I offer this psalm to you today, not as an expression of triumph or celebration because our time of trial is over, but rather as an invitation to see the goodness of God, to know that his grace and his promises are already our possession, and to come together, even today, in large hope and great joy.

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6 Those who go out weeping,
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will return with songs of joy,
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With love from your brother and servant, Simon.