

Growing in Faith

As those of you who were here last Sunday will know, last week's Gospel was Luke's account of the call of the first disciples and the miraculous catch of fish. You will remember that I invited us to move from that reading to think around the theme of 'Gathering in love', as the beginning of a conversation about what we think we're about here at St Peter's when we say that are "Gathering in love, growing in faith, giving hope to all." I invited us to start reflecting on what it means to gather in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to gather intentionally as the church, to gather for worship, and to gather for different flavours of fellowship.

Thinking about how and why we gather, leads us into reflecting on what we might mean when we talk about growing in faith, and that's what I want us to think around particularly this morning. Instead of turning first to the gospel reading, as I usually do, I want us to pick up on images that we find in both the passage from Jeremiah and in this morning's Psalm.

Jeremiah, in the course of a long passage denouncing the sin of Judah, recounts an oracle in which a contrast is drawn between "those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength" and "those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Whereas the former will be like a shrub in the desert, the latter will be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream, which will have no need to fear in the heat or anxious in drought. Its leaves will be ever green and it won't cease to bear fruit. The Psalmist uses a similar image for those whose delight is in the Law of the Lord, those who meditate day and night on God's teachings.

I find this imagery very evocative – we can picture the difference between some poor little shrub struggling in parched desert soil, and a tree flourishing with green leaves and fruit because it has ready access to the water it needs. If we're trying to grow things we know that they need to be planted in the right sort of environment, the right kind of soil, with access to water and enough light, and the right sorts of nutrients.

So it is with our growth in faith. We put down roots in the soil, and we need to access the water that can sustain us in times of difficulty and anxiety. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he will give a spring of water welling up to eternal life. As we gather for worship, as we spend time in prayer growing in friendship with God, that spring of water is being offered to us to refresh, revive, and sustain us. And our faith needs nourishing – we gather for worship to be fed in word and sacrament, but our faith is best sustained and nourished if we allow ourselves to be fed in other ways too: by gathering for study and prayer, by taking delight in the Law of the Lord and meditating on it. Last week we heard the call of the first disciples – disciples are those who learn. Jesus invites us to come and learn of him. We are invited to listen and learn, and so to grow in faith, to grow in holiness.

So when we're thinking about Growing in Faith together, I would like us to be thinking first about how we grow spiritually. How we all together keep growing in our understanding of who God is, and what it means to follow Christ. How we grow closer to God in prayer, as our roots go deeper and deeper down towards the source of that spring of living water. So on the way out after this service, at parish breakfast, in the coming week I wonder if you could reflect with someone else about something that helps you grow in your faith.

But as well as thinking about growing spiritually, we will also need to be thinking about how we grow numerically, how we help more people to gather with us for worship and fellowship, to join us on that journey of learning and following and serving. As I said last week, that means we will need to keep thinking afresh about our habits and culture of invitation and welcome. We might start with reflecting on how we are going to invite back the people who have drifted away, and make them feel welcome home when they do gather with us again?

And there is one particular area where we will need to think particularly about growing in faith and I'd just like us to do a non-scientific survey for a minute, and see how typical we are as a congregation.

Can you put your hand up if you became a Christian before you were 18? Now can you put your hand down if you were older than 11.... Older than 5.....

Some research done by ComRes for the CofE in 2017 suggested that of Christian adults, 40% had first come to faith – granted different people will mean different things by that phrase – but 40% first came to faith before they were 5 years old. Conversely, some research about when people from religious backgrounds, not just Christian, who left their faith considered themselves to have done so, 34% (just over a third) said they were between 11 and 18, and about another fifth when they were between 19 and 24.

So our conversation about how we grow spiritually and numerically will need us to think particularly - and particularly carefully - about how we help children and young people in their growth in faith, how we think afresh about our ministry with and among children and families. That includes everything from Pebbles – we had 35 kids last Tuesday and tidy-up time looked like a disaster zone! – to our engagement with the many(!) schools in the parish, to what we should do about things like Sunday School and Messy Church, to how we follow-up with the families that come to us for baptism and how we help the parents to help their children grow up in faith – to live by trust in God and come to confirmation, as the baptism service says. How we might help some of those parents to come to confirmation and be part of the worshipping life of the church with their children. These are questions for every parish not just ours, but over the coming weeks as we think together about gathering, growing, giving we need to discern how we are going to start to try and answer them to bear fruit here in this season.

These questions can feel quite big and quite scary, but they are also exciting: in last week's Gospel we heard Jesus tell Simon, 'Do not be afraid'. We need to hear that too, remembering that the one who calls and sends us is God, who is faithful, and will equip us for the work he calls us to do. There is so much possibility.

We're approaching Lent – which is an invitation to all of us to head out with Jesus into the desert, and to find there the pools of living water which sustain us, to drink deep of them and to grow in faith, and to bear fruit and share the hope that we have come to know in Christ, the source of all our hope and life.