**Easter 4. 2023 – Life to the Full**

**Bromsgrove Team Service Stoke Prior**

I love the church. When it’s at its best it is the most beautiful thing.

When church is at its best, people are enabled to live life to the full, secure in their identity, playing their part, connected to their life’s purpose, supported and fulfilled as they serve in whatever context – home, work, volunteering or within the faith setting. When church is at its best, the hungry are fed – physically and spiritually, those held captive to addiction are set free, the lonely are included in families, the sick are healed, communities are transformed, When church is at its best, people are caught up in wonder, love and praise as they encounter God in worship, through song and sacrament, teaching and intercession, lives are enriched, God is glorified.

When church is at its best, it is attractive and life giving, people want to be part of it, they can’t get enough of it. Church at its best is healthy and sustainable because everyone is fully engaged. Church at its best is why I got ordained, why I answered a sense of calling to give myself full time to ministry, why I now serve as an archdeacon in the Diocese of Worcester. I have a dream that church can still be at its best. I long to see each of our churches and the people who are part of them realise their potential, be all that God intended them to be, live abundantly.

And if I am honest, at times I find it hard to hold on to that dream, that passion, that vision of the church in all its beauty. Perhaps because glimpses of it are not so frequent in my life as they once were, perhaps because I encounter church communities where that vsion of what might be, what could be, what should be, has been almost lost. Perhaps because I more often meet with church members who are weary and wistful, and just a little bit sad. Faithful people who serve from a sense of duty, but whose passion has waned, who find coming to church and all that’s involved a relentless slog, if they are really honest, and are not quite sure why they do it anymore. Perhaps that’s how some of you feel today.

It's OK to be real about that, and honest. I have days when I wonder why I do it. But then I read passages like the ones we have before us today, two of my favourites, and I remember why.

Being church in the UK right now is challenging to be sure. We know from the most recent census results that fewer people than ever self-describe as Christians, less than half the population. Nationally and internationally the Anglican Church is struggling amidst complex disagreements about the next stages of the LLF process, facing potential break up, talk of disestablishment is in the air in an increasingly multi-faith society. The financial models which enabled parish ministry in days gone by when congregations were larger and gave generously are no longer sufficient. Teams like yours are no longer able to fund the stipends of a priest for each church, maintain and heat the buildings amidst a cost-of-living crisis and high inflation rates. The outlook can feel pretty bleak.

Yet, amidst all of this, we read again that Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly, to the full. In this Easter season, as we rejoice in his resurrection, perhaps we can recapture that sense of abundant fulness, reimagine living that life in community with our Christian sisters and brothers in church community, rethink what church is and can be in Bromsgrove in 2023.

The church described in Acts 2 is radically simple, joyful, inspiring, and very different from what we experience as church most of the time now. How we have complicated things! Of course some structure emerged as the early church grew, and some disagreements arose, and issues of doctrine and practice were wrestled over. That’s what most of the rest of the New Testament is about. We shouldn’t over idealise the version of church we read about here. But we can take some overarching principles and let them inform our life together. It’s good to revisit this picture of church at its most beautiful, and seek to rediscover any elements of it we possibly can.

So what did these early believers do?

***They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship***. Their involvement was committed and dedicated. As new Christians they were really keen to learn, to hang out with others on the same journey. I wonder if we perhaps take it all for granted. It’s interesting how lockdown impacted many churches. Some people really very much missed that opportunity for fellowship, were desperate to meet up again, but for others it was the culmination of a gradual drift, and they haven’t come back. Yet I was interested to hear recently of a couple of churches that attract younger people. They were saying that now folk had joined them online when that was all that could happen, and once they were allowed to come, they did – all fresh and excited, getting baptised and getting stuck in! There is a deep spiritual searching amongst many of our young people who have grown up in an increasingly secular culture.

Devotion is about attitude, and the posture of our hearts. What would it take to recapture our hearts so that growing as disciples and having fellowship together was the most important thing for us? Something we are excited and captivated by?

***They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers***. We spend hours in arguments about how the eucharist should be conducted and how we pray. Do we intinct or share a common cup, is it ok to pray prayers of blessing over committed relationships? Prayer changes us! If our lives are prayerful ones, they will be well lived, lived to the full. I know that when my prayer life has grown dry or stale, everything else about my faith journey is harder. Prayer is about deepening our relationship with God. Whether we pray alone or with others, it sustains us. This passage challenges me to pray more, to spend time with the God who loves me.

***Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles***. I have had seasons in my life when I have seen miracles, signs and wonders, and have been in awe. I have prayed for healing and seen God change situations supernaturally. Not for a long while, but I have experienced this, so I know God still acts supernaturally today, through the Holy Spirit. There is something for us perhaps to reflect on here about our expectations. I long to experience another season of God’s supernatural activity, but it is a mystery to me why it happens sometimes and not others,

***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***. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the early church for us in today’s culture and the environment in which most of us live. I have friends who live effectively ‘by faith’, working for mission organisations, large or small, where their income is dependent entirely on giving. I know of those who live in community, sharing all things in common. These are of course radical examples, but I think there is a real call in this for us to think about how we have things in common as churches, as the Bromsgrove Team. Being wise stewards of our resources if we follow the Acts 2 model, would seem to involve not hanging on to legacies for ‘our’ church, but sharing our resources more widely, not ‘fighting our corner’, ‘survival of the fittest’, but rather holding things in common, helping as people have need.

Practically and structurally we must take this on board in our church communities. We have become so bound up in buildings and parish boundaries that we lose sight of being the people of God together, a body where if one part is hurting, all are affected. In some dioceses the Ministry Share is called Common Fund in an attempt to help people make this connection. What does it mean for us to both take our local responsibilities seriously, cherish our historic buildings and steward our resources wisely, whilst being generous and sharing with open hands and hearts with those who are part of our wider fellowship? Can I encourage you to pray and ask God for wisdom and insight about this, on your own and together.

***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.*** The faith journey of these first Christians was not Sunday Christianity. It permeated their whole life, they met in the temple and in their homes, they shared food and fellowship – they liked each other! They did life together abundantly.

And the result of all this? They had ***the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved***. People looked at the community of faith and saw something that made them want to be part of it. Church was attractive. People became disciples. The group of believers grew daily.

We have a vision to grow as kingdom people. That’s about being the kind of people we read about here. We are called to worship God, praising God, being devoted to teaching and prayer, to breaking bread together. We are called to make disciples, to live in such a way that others want to join us and discover life in all its fullness. We are called to share hope, witnessing to the saving and healing power of God at work in our lives. We are called to transform our communities, serving those in need, looking outwards, aware of others, making a kingdom difference.

We have a long-term plan with key priorities we have discerned will enable as may as possible of our churches to be healthy and sustainable, focussing on renewal, on engaging with children and families, on starting new worshipping communities which perhaps look and feel a little bit more like the new worshipping community we read about in Acts 2. I know you are engaging with these ideas as a team, which is really encouraging, and I will be praying for you as you explore what this might look like for you.

But most of all, I pray that you as individuals, and as a community together, might recapture a vision of the church in all her beauty, which fills your hearts with wonder, love and praise, rekindling passion and reminding you why you are here!

Acts 2

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day 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, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.