

2026-04-26 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Ezra 3: 1-13; Ephesians 2: 11-end

In Ezra, we see God's people excited about rebuilding the temple, organising themselves into work teams to get the task done.

I think it is relatively easy to raise the money and enthusiasm to build a new church, by which I mean a physical building, especially one that is expected to be conspicuous and outlive by some margin those funding it. Just look at the speed that this church was rebuilt and reconsecrated after its tower fell down after evensong just over three hundred years ago – 3 years I think. Look at the speed with which Notre Dame has been restored. Look at Coventry Cathedral a competition in 1950, foundation stone laid in 1956 and consecrated in 1962.

Maintaining that enthusiasm is another matter – and yet, so very vital – not just for maintaining the building, in fact, the only good purpose for maintaining the building is so that God's worshipping people have a place to be the family of God. The ongoing enthusiasm is vital however, so that the family of God can be just that.

There is part of faith which is egocentric – especially when you are a new believer. It can be like falling in love for the first time! Or perhaps, more like being loved for the first time – when you feel the centre of someone's attention, when they notice the smallest thing about you because you are held so thoroughly in their gaze, spoil you with gifts and affection. I hope you have a sense of that still in your relationship with God.

As time goes by, this you-centred love empowers you to bring others into that warm nucleus, so that they can feel blessed by that core of love.

The new believer learns that they are part of God's family and with that comes responsibilities – primarily to love God and neighbour with all their being!

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians – and the usual caveats here, it's not Paul's usual writing style although said to be from Paul, but neither is it divergent from Paul's known core message; and it's not necessarily to Christians in Ephesus, but it clearly has a universal, in both time and geography, message – the writer (we'll call him Paul) is writing to Gentiles.

Those who were outside of Judaism, brought into the family of God in the understanding of the times, by Jesus, with Paul their most vocal advocate in the early church. Paul, a fervent Jew of course, seems here to me to be stressing to the Gentiles of the Ephesian church, how wonderful this is for them. He's telling them they have an absolute right to be part of the church – everyone there is there because of God's grace, not because of who their parents were or how good they were at keeping the laws of the Jewish faith.

I think those of us here might need to hear this message in a different way. Most of us here are more in the position of being the insiders than the, until recently, outsiders.

God's family is, please God, growing all the time. This home of God's family is changing its members all the time. I have been a member of this community for a while now ... a little over 40 years. I am a spring chicken compared to the likes of Pauline who must have somewhere coming up to double that number of years. Some of you can count your time here in weeks whether that's as an enquirer, a new Christian or new as a worshipper here. And yet we all come through those doors at the back as equals in God's eyes.

I'm reading a small book at the moment echoing the words of a hymn which I didn't know but perhaps you do – Horatio Spafford's *When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*

In it a number of contributors have a chapter each to say what gives them the strength to say that 'all is well with their soul' in times of trial. I was particularly struck by the chapter that speaks of strength from community.

We all belong to many communities – our actual families, those we went to school or college with, those we **PTO**

work with, those we share sporting or creative activities with – but the community or communities we worship with is very special.

Our faith is in many ways counter-cultural so those we share it with are sometimes those best placed to celebrate with us or commiserate with us; they are those who understand our lifestyle commitments and will join us in challenges we take on for God.

They are certainly those who are the ones who can pray for us - and there are many times and reasons when we are unable to pray for ourselves. I can tell you, if you've not experienced this for yourself yet, that knowing one is held in the prayers of one's faith family, takes a huge burden away and allows the light, God's light, to still shine in.

Like in any family, it's not always all smooth-running – but sharing laughter and tears, working together at God's work binds us together and hopefully makes it easier to reconcile when there are fallouts, a lack of trust, differences of opinion, strong headedness, real wrong-doing, sometimes blighted by a disaster of some kind.

When we come together to worship we seek forgiveness together and receive forgiveness together. That surely helps us to move forwards, together. It is so important, vital – vital in the sense that life depends on it, both God's life in this community and our lives– vital that we work to be reconciled to each other, constantly work at being a loving family.

The word which comes up most probably in these dozen verses is peace – the peace of knowing that God holds us in God's hands come what may and come who may. For our sake, and for the sake of all others, there are no longer Jew and Gentile, no longer insiders and outsiders but Peace to those who are near and Peace to those who are far off.

Praise be!

Amen