

22nd March 2021

Dear Friends

One of the profound experiences that shaped our scriptures was the experience of exile. Psalm 137 captures the sense of grief and confusion this caused the people of God when they were carted away to Babylon. 'By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept when our captors asked us for songs, saying sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

Some people among us are literally in exile because they had to flee the land of their birth but this year, we have all shared in an experience of exile because of the pandemic, denied the freedom to meet in familiar ways and confined to our homes for much of the while. We have been living in exile, learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

Last week the deacons of New North Road Baptist Church met together and gave nearly an hour of careful thought to the question of reopening the church. Something that was so simple and easy to do just over a year ago is now a complex practical and emotional question. We felt the weight of it as we talked, mindful of how much many people miss being able to meet in person.

Speaking personally, I sometimes tire of screens. Zoom is a marvel and it has enabled many of us to stay connected and share together but I am often exhausted by too much screen time. I wonder if this because our brains have to work much harder on screen-time, filling in the gaps that the absence of many of the visual clues that many, but not all of us use to make sense of our world.

The deacon's reflected on the different voices and opinions we have heard people express over recent months. These people who are eager to return and who would come tomorrow and people who are cautious and concerned about our ongoing vulnerability to the virus, especially while we cannot meet with visitors in our own homes and people younger than fifty are still waiting for their first vaccines. We were also mindful of people who want to return soon, but do not want to do this until we

can meet together without restrictions which would enable us to sing, share family news and greet each other without fear of contamination.

The deacons also considered the latest advice from Kirklees and the Baptist Union which do not prevent us from opening but advise caution. It was genuinely hard to for us to make a decision, about reopening, so what we have chosen to do is to commit to opening on Pentecost on May 23rd which is a month before nearly all restrictions might be relaxed on June 21st, if the government follows through on its road map. We are not excluding the possibility of opening before then and will keep the situation under review.

I know some of you will be disappointed by this, while others will wonder if it is still too soon. I am disappointed and yet I also know that when we return at Pentecost, we will still not be able to sing together and will have to observe the same restrictions as before including spatial distancing. If all goes well, then we could aim for a 'back to church Sunday on June 27th' but that could change if the governments road map slips.

I confess that I am really sad about this, while believing it is necessary. I grieve for the missed opportunities that we are being denied by the pandemic. There are candidates awaiting baptism, creative ideas for Nowruz, Holy Week and Easter, good things for the church meeting to consider, children's events and many other gatherings people love that will have to wait until later in the year or next year. With this in mind the deacons are making a commitment to have a big church picnic in the summer when we hope many of us can meet in the sunshine, share good food and laughter, play games, go for walks and walk and make conversation.

This Sunday is Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem and the people shouted Hosanna, welcoming him to the holy city. The people who were with him, making their pilgrimage would have remembered the pilgrim psalms. Here is one that acts as a counterpoint to Psalm 137 that I quoted at the beginning. Psalm 126.

'When the Lord brought back the captives from Zion, we were like dreamers. Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy... Those who sowed with tears shall reap with songs of joy.'

Your friend and pastor

Mark

