

12th July – Ezra 3:1-6,10-13 ‘Changing World, Unchanging God’

I’m sure many of you, like me, have had the experience of remembering something you did or something that happened a few months ago and it feeling like it happened much longer ago than it really did. For example, today I tried to think about the last Cafe Church events we held at St Mary’s or All Saints – both of which took place in March – and I can barely remember them. That was BC – Before Covid.

The world has changed vastly in just a few months, and our landscape as the people of God has changed with it. In years to come, big brains may look back on this season and say that this was the season of most profound change since the Reformation 500 years ago. This was the time when a significant proportion of the people of God re-imagined what it looked like to worship God and follow Jesus.

That’s exciting, but it’s also unsettling. In today’s reading we see something take place that hadn’t been possible for at least 50 years. The first wave of God’s people had returned to Israel and begun to lay the foundations of a new temple. They began offering the regular sacrifices again, and finally, on the appointed day, they celebrated the completion of the foundations with a great ceremony of commemoration. And the ceremony consciously tried to resurrect the old ways, to do what they’d always done, even using the great song of praise used by Solomon when he dedicated the first temple over 400 years previously: ‘God is good, and his love endures forever.’

Now we might find it hard to look back a few months and remember what things used to be like – well, here, some of the old priests and family heads who were children when they left Israel are able to remember what the old temple was like from 50 or 60 years ago. And let’s remember that they were restoring a pattern of worship which had been largely unchanged for hundreds of years. The temple, the sacrifices, the rituals and psalms had acted as the fulcrum of their worshipping life for generations.

But something had changed. Even as they sang the old songs, and tried to re-imagine themselves as the people of Solomon’s day, they knew things were different. So we get this extraordinary scene painted in vv12-13 at the end of the chapter when half the people are shouting for joy at being home, and half the people are weeping in distress because home doesn’t feel like home anymore. As it says: ‘No-one could distinguish the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.’

This echoes our experience too. Some of us will be celebrating the new life we’re seeing in our new patterns. Others will be mourning the unfamiliarity of it. Many of us will feel a bit of both. And I want to say today, firstly that **it’s OK to weep**. It’s OK to miss some of what has gone, and to offer your weeping even as others offer their shouts of joy. We are emotional beings because God has made us that way, and we can offer all our conflicting emotions to Him.

But second, let's remind ourselves of what God's people also chose to remind themselves. 'God is good, and his love endures forever.' In our endlessly changing world, **we rest our hope in an unchanging God**, a God whose character remains the same. The same love, the same goodness, the same rock on which we can build our lives. In this changing world, we need to rely on our unchanging God more than ever.

Finally, though let me add a little twist to what I've just said. I almost called this week 'Our unchanging God of change', because I wanted to suggest that even though God doesn't change, he *does* call us **to journey with Him, in and through change**. The lesson of history is that God's people need to keep re-inventing themselves to retain the life of God within them.

I believe this is such a season. Amid the tragedy and uncertainty, God is renewing us, God is bringing us life. *And may that life, rooted firm in our great unchanging God, hold us fast in our changing world today. Amen.*