

## Gathered in the Light of Christ, Guided by hope 5-Jan-25

Sometimes, at this time of year, in this part of the world, it feels like everyone else has gone away, and only the 'remaining few' are still around. Of course, we know that by the end of summer, everyone will have come back in time to pick up everyday life.

Our ancient friend Jeremiah, however, is speaking to a people who have been spread far and wide by the Babylonian conquest. People have been removed from their land, family members are missing or perhaps killed, and social systems have been destroyed. And when everyone is drawn back to Judah, there are deep divisions between groups and vastly different understandings of what the future community ought to look like – cliques had been formed which made it difficult for either people who experienced separation or new people to gain a foothold in their 'new' social and cultural environments. We come to gather in the light of Christ, and it is hope that guides and keeps us on course towards the light.

From the wisdom of Jeremiah, we have a strong message to hear. His message of restoration, hope and community renewal resonates deeply with our current experiences in a post Covid pandemic era and long-awaited holidays inclusive of the Christmas and Easter celebrations. His prophetic words joyfully call us back to our identity as Christ's followers amidst the painful challenges we've endure over the years. As we continue to journey through the complexities of gathering for worship either in the church or the hall we may find ourselves facing changes that challenge us to re-think how we connect with one another, either with those we know well, and those who have newly joined our faithful and caring community.

One of the things that make the UCA different is our across-the-board diversity, which is inclusive of our beliefs, values and how we express them. One of the goals for each congregation is to create a space where everyone knows and feels a sense of belonging, despite a diversity of theologies, Christ's Good News will be heard, and experienced.

After the Christmas break comes the moments of reconnection. It isn't a new phenomenon; it's been around for a long time. Throughout history, moments of disruption have often led to opportunities for reconnection or new connections. Following times of separation – be it a pandemic, major holidays like Christmas and Easter, or personal crises – communities often experience a strong desire for togetherness – maybe even 'to the good old days'. After isolation due to the recent pandemic, many people yearned to gather together to worship God, rather than on zoom, to make music and sing together, to experience fellowship and small gatherings once more – in other words to renew and forge new relationships all the while redefining what community life at St Ninian's would look like.

However, these gatherings are still infused with complexity. The pandemic has created an environment of post-pandemic cultural norms. As we have slowly returned to familiar

activities of WAGs, UCAF, Coffee mornings, various sales, community events and Sunday worship we find an emotional and spiritual shift has occurred. Worshipers have asked themselves do I need to come to worship to experience and express my faith, enjoy fellowship and grow my spiritual relationship with Christ?

Having the option of zooming has altered the landscape of worship for some people who now have the ability to worship with their community remotely when unable to attend physically either due to ill-health or holidays. However, there remains a group of people who still fear being in an enclosed space with a group of people.

Not being dismissive of those who feel that way after experiencing the disruptiveness of such things and facing change is crucial for each of us. The community has shifted a little in just how we relate to each other now. By prayerfully acknowledging feelings, grief for a familiarity which has been lost, anxiety over changed dynamics and through allowing ourselves to rejoice at renewed gatherings is one way of facilitating healing. It's ok for us to acknowledge and share our feelings in our environment of love for each other with empathy and understanding and without judging but always leading ourselves back to the stillness of Christ's calming and generous voice.

Jeremiah speaks to the restoration of joy for the Israelites, something which we can also consider in light of our own community experiences. We can be joyful in our new experiences without feeling guilty about leaving the past to the past.

In our new landscape and expectations, it's good to know what's expected from us. In the same way the Israelites were reminded of their covenant with God after a time of separation, we too can benefit from re-establishing our shared values, patterns, traditions and witness to God within our community. In this era of information sharing, we can share Christ's love and grace in ways that weren't possible in the past. As we do this, we remove barriers to the seekers who want to know why we continue to gather weekly, why we chose to live by our Christian values and belief systems in the hope of one day enjoying God's promises, and why love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness is so important to us.

Differences of opinion are commonly shared now more than ever before as we are offered diverse perspectives on many subjects leaving little space to digest the long-term consequences of what's on offer. Navigating those conversations requires the art of intentional listening – I think Jeremiah did quite a lot of intentional listening not only to the joyful conversations, but also to those which he found challenging. It requires us to have empathetic compassion which we are encouraged to have through Christ's teaching of love acknowledging the diversity that exists throughout the Body of Christ. This shouldn't be seen as conflict but rather as an opportunity for spiritual growth as we learn more about ourselves and each other and Christ's work in our lives and the world.

Ultimately, the call to love one another remains at the top of the list. The promise of God's love and restoration is central to our Christianity. Likewise, our community reflects

that divine love. This love is to be nurtured and upheld amid our daily freedom of choices we must make. It doesn't take much to show kindness, compassion, service, witness and solidarity as tangible expressions of who we are – followers of the risen Christ. For those who are having a bad day it could be a game changer.

I mentioned prayer a few moments ago, there's a transformative power in prayer. Inviting God into our discussion, decisions, and experiences allows God's wisdom to permeate through our lives and actions, and attitudes. Praying together and for one another creates a sense of shared purpose and spiritual grounding, reassuring us of God's presence while we are experiencing changes in our lives.

I finish today with an acknowledgement that navigating the shifts in our community following significant breaks necessitates a concerted effort to nurture and cultivate Christ's love, understanding and fellowship for those we know, and those we are coming to know. Everyone wants to have a place where they know they belong.

Jeremiah provides us with a reminder of the possibility of renewal and unity, even after disruptions of one kind or another. As we engage with each other through open hearts and minds and conversations nurturing a spirit of grace and love, we build a more resilient community. Although this journey may be complex it's always well-grounded in our faith with the risen Christ, our commitment to Christ and each other, we enable ourselves to embrace this new phase with hope and determination to do better and to be better.

In our gathering, and acknowledgement of our diversity as the Body of Christ, and leaning into the Spirit's guiding presence, we are enabled to be a thriving community which looks forward to being challenged.

As you further reflect on what Jeremiah has to say to us today, I hope and pray that our gatherings also reflect the joy, empathy, and authentic living, which echo the promises of restoration and love that he so encouragingly articulates to us. So, together let's move forward, embracing change while nurturing the bonds of our faithful community as we continue to live out Jesus' command to love one another as He loves us.

Amen