

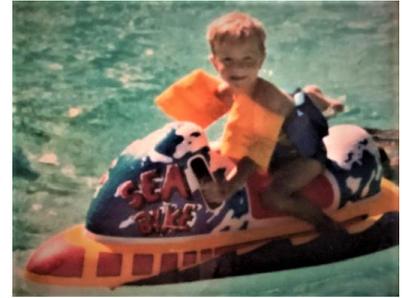
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Dear Friends,

Are we there yet?

*You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace:
The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Isaiah 55:10-13)*

When our five boys were much younger we used to bundle them all into our old Toyota Previa along with our luggage, buckets and spades, inflatable boats, fishing nets and far too many toys and drive hundreds of miles to the South of France. Fifteen minutes after leaving the house it would begin....how much longer, are we nearly there, how many miles to the next loo, how long until we can eat. This would go on for a couple of hours until we reached Dover and then another thirteen after arriving in Calais. And then when we eventually arrived to temperatures of nearly thirty degrees, shining sun, sparkling sea and clear blue pools, someone would inevitably say it was too hot. Whilst the ice cream and baguettes were more than tolerable at



mealtimes, even the best French restaurant cuisine was no match for chicken nuggets, baked beans or marmite soldiers on sliced white! Even the tap water was inferior! Like the Israelites who complained to Moses that they were fed up with Manna from heaven, our children hankered after their “normal”. Like them I so often look back with nostalgia longing for the things that once were and that I can no longer have.

After a collection of prophetic speeches that promised the Jewish exiles a miraculous restoration and glorious future, in Isaiah 55 the prophet assures those who have been exiled from their homeland that they should trust in God’s promises made through the prophet because these words are God’s. Those in exile are fearful for, whilst they were exiled in Babylon, that nation was itself crushed by Cyrus the Persian King. But the prophet makes clear that the God of Israel chose Cyrus to be the instrument of Judah’s liberation and Jerusalem’s restoration. To make himself clear about Cyrus’s victory over Babylon, the prophet uses creation analogies that people understood only too well. Their land was completely dependent on rainfall but there in Mesopotamia where they were farming in exile water from the Tigris and Euphrates was channelled into canals to water the land. Of course those who were far from home knew that this water came from the rain and snow that fell in the mountains far North. Back in Judah, they knew their need of God’s many blessings from heaven for Palestine had no comparable river system and the location of the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee made irrigation virtually impossible. The sons and daughters of Judah depended on the rains and starvation was their greatest fear. Bountiful harvests gave food for today and seed for tomorrow. God who gave the rain gave the bounty. So when God promises to restore Judah this was more than a faint hope. The prophet says that what God wills God accomplishes:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return until they have watered the earth..
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth: It shall not return to me empty
You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace....*

The prophet was not simply passing information to some exiles about their future, although he was doing that too, he was also reminding them that the word of God, like the rain from heaven, is the means by which God’s purposes are revealed and fulfilled. When God speaks, the world is changed. Of course, people can accept or reject God’s Word. The Parable of the Sower, our

Sunday gospel (Matthew 13), makes this abundantly clear. God may sow generously, even recklessly, but unless the ground is watered and tended, or the heart softened, the seeds or words of God will just wither and maybe even die.

In the end, despite all the prophet's assurances, the return to Jerusalem was not exactly a triumphal procession through a desert transformed into a garden and yet God's word was fulfilled through this remnant. The prophet's vision ends encouraging those who've lived far too long away from their homeland to leave Babylon with joy and to rediscover a new future. God's creation will be transformed, God's people should trust that they are in God's hands and that God's words do not return empty. The question the prophet is asking is whether they can believe in a God whose hand is in all creation and who wants to bless and comfort them as they return to their homeland.

I am delighted to share with you that, whilst "there is no compulsion", churches in Wales may open from next Sunday, 19th July – and this is what we will do after months of yearning for our old homeland. Yet I recognise that, like the exiles in Babylon, many of us will be unsure if we want to return to the place where once we worshipped God. Some of us have got quite used to this long exile - our lands have been watered for us; we can even attend YouTube or Zoom worship on our sofas, with a glass of wine or a coffee cup in hand. Now, as we are invited to return to our old Jerusalem, some of us are scared. It's the same old story. At long last we are nearly there and, yes, the food may taste different. We will not be cuddled up together but spaced apart carefully following the government and Church in Wales' guidelines and our own Diocesan approved risk assessments. It is unlikely that we will be singing hymns for a while but there will be music and there will be Holy Communion. For months, many of you have told me how much you miss receiving the sacrament – now, like the water in France, it may taste a little different...our hands will be sanitised as we enter and leave our buildings, and we will not be hugging and kissing old friends as we did once upon a time. Those who lead worship will be scrupulous in cleansing and sanitising and if you come to the first service of the day in Christ Church or St John's the church will have been empty for around 72 hours - your place of worship may even be safer than your supermarket or coffee shop! The church will be cleaned after each use and you will be welcomed by stewards as you enter and exit and be guided to your socially distanced seat. Your weekly orders of service will be your Sunday take away as leaflets cannot be reused. And if you would like to make a donation to the church you will be able to do so using the digital plate (without touching its surface) or you can donate just as you normally do when you enter or leave the church. We will ask you to certify that you are healthy as you use the hand gel on entry (and again as you leave) as part of the churches' approved track and trace system. We will do all we can to keep you safe and keep you well and, of course, we know you will do the same by following our guidance and perhaps even wearing a face mask if you wish. Beyond that I can only encourage you to trust that God has been, is and ever will be amongst us, blessing us and sowing his seeds of love and hope, healing and forgiveness in our hearts each day.

I very much look forward to seeing you - and if the weather is fine next Sunday at 12 noon we will raise a glass in Christ Church grounds to give thanks for our return to worship and for the ordination of Belinda, our new Deacon.

With my love and prayers,

Vicki

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