

Heavenly father. Send your Holy Spirit to open our hearts; anoint my lips; that I may proclaim your love in Jesus' name. Amen.

Happy St Luke's day, the feast day of the patron saint of medicine and healing and as we are firmly, sadly, on the trajectory of the second wave of the pandemic, the timing feels particularly apt.

As you've already heard, Luke was a physician who journeyed a lot with Saint Paul. He is attributed as the author of the gospel of Luke and also the Acts of the Apostles. A group of us have been studying the book of Acts for several weeks now. We had our last session this last week and we learnt many things along the way.

There are many themes, it's very rich as books go, but I would like to share with you just two, highlighted through Luke's writings.

The first of these themes was about healthy relationships, rooted in love, open to challenge and collaborative in outward expression.

The early church lived in a continual state of flux, driven by an ever-deepening understanding of Jesus' great commission to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth.

This meant that peoples of every land, every culture, both male and female.

They learnt that everyone had value in God's kingdom, everyone mattered, and everyone was precious, but in order to embrace them into God's family, change and adaptation would also be required.

And this collaborative journey started with Jesus.

When Jesus sent out the seventy-two, it wasn't just a dry run for the 72 being sent out individually – No, that's actually counter gospel. The intention was never that they did it alone.

The seventy-two were sent in pairs, because togetherness is a reflection of the Trinitarian nature of God, and therefore the pattern for us, the church today.

We are not meant to do this alone. We are meant to be in unity with Jesus and with one another, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The unifying presence of Jesus in our lives equips and enables us to embrace the uniqueness and difference that all humanity represents. It is deeply relational and life-giving, and it is also in essence healing.

As we are reconciled into the Father's heart, through the Son, we are also reconciled one to another. That should be the trajectory that we're on.

The early church wrestled with how you welcome new and different whilst retaining their core values that defined them.

They found it hard and challenging, but always at the heart was the call to be God's family: togetherness, unity and equality. This meant letting go of the notion of 'self', and embracing the notion of 'we'

The destructive forces of Individualism and isolationism have no part in God's family and they had to work that out.

Wrestling with change in order to grow and flourish, as family, is fundamental to a healthy church.

What is not the work of the Holy Spirit, in God's kingdom, is a church which is static and monochrome in its identity and expression. A church that has lost its heart for the poor, the vulnerable and the stranger; a church that superimposes human flawed constructs of power, and manipulation, and a church that is deaf to the cries of the oppressed and the enslaved. That is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

The early church found adapting to change challenging and hard work; we should not be surprised that we struggle with it as well.

But we should not be afraid of facing up to those challenges, but rather make time to continually ask of ourselves, what are we doing to welcome in new and diverse, and how are we prepared to change to make room for new people?

We are held together not through uniformity and the status quo, as comfortable as that might be, but through the love of Christ, He is the glue that binds us.

Today we're being invited at 8 o'clock tonight to pray for the NHS; for all front-line workers, for those who are seeking to bring hope and healing to those most in need, by placing a candle – here's one I prepared earlier for children's space - placing it in the window of our homes, lighting it, and saying the prayer, which has been given to us which is on our website.

The NHS, as we all know, is remarkable and amazing. Just as Jesus loves all of us no matter who we are, the NHS provides health care free for all of us, young and old, rich and poor, male and female and we know that they will do whatever they can to bring healing to the sick. But we also know that they are going to be stretched beyond their limits this winter.

When we pray for them, and when we pray for anyone, we are acknowledging that they matter, they are of value before the God of heaven who loves them already, and just as God takes them into his heart, so the act of praying allows our hearts to also embrace with them. Togetherness.

Healing and Hope have always been the hallmarks of the church, where the Holy Spirit is evident. People are healed and the church grows. But it grows because it becomes increasingly diverse.

And this leads me to the second point, which is HOPE.

Luke and Paul went on many adventures together; they even served time in prison, but maybe one of the most spectacular

moments was the extraordinary storm that led to a shipwreck off the coast of Crete, recounted most vividly in the Acts of the Apostles ch27, the detail of which Luke describes the storm and the valiant efforts of all aboard to survive the devastating waves, leaves the reader in no doubt that their situation was utterly, utterly hopeless.

Yet, in the midst of this, the apostle Paul receives a message from God that, yes, the ship will be wrecked, but all will be saved.

Paul conviction, and total trust in God's promises, enables Paul to speak to all on board. As the wind and the waves bashed, he was able to give instructions that would be heard and followed.

In due course, God's promise is realised; the ship is sunk, but all survive. For those who could not swim, they float to safety on the wreckage of the ship to the island of Malta.

The painful issues of racism, poverty, climate change, slavery and the pandemic, to name but a few, weigh heavy on all our hearts; the isolationist power hungry politics of many of our world leaders is frightening. Injustice seems to be stalking humanity like a hungry lion and in the midst of this raging storm, the question is whispered: for fear there is no answer, where is HOPE?

Sometimes, when all is forlorn and hopeless, it is those moments that the voice of hope, uttered from a person of faith, can be heard most clearly above the storm: a voice that

speaks with conviction brings hope to the hopeless and shines light in the darkness, and our world feels very dark at the moment.

Hope is not founded on the transitional happiness or sadness or joy of our present circumstances, of living in the world. Like the waves of the sea which one moment are calm the next a raging swell – no. That is not where our HOPE is located.

The Christian HOPE is located in the future promise, promised by the one who keeps His promises, the same God who created all that is good and magnificent in this world.

We find healing and hope when we are in right relationship with God, with each other, and with ourselves. And right relationship means embracing the diversity of this world and allowing it to change, shape and inform us as the body of Christ.

‘We’ will always be a bigger word than ‘I’, because we have God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as part of our family.

One of the greatest strengths is that we are God’s family and we are not alone.

So as we go into this second wave of the pandemic, into the winter season, let us spend more time not less with each other, through phone calls, Zoom, Google Meet, whatever medium works for you, to allow you to talk and listen to one

another, to hold each other in prayer, and to use our voices to speak words of hope to those who are feeling hopeless.

Encourage each other; study the bible together; make it our business to get to know one another, especially if the other is different, for how else we will know how we need to change or adapt to become better.

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned the bible study that I have been part of for the last few weeks. What I didn't tell you was the best thing of all, was the journey we did together as we studied. Whilst I was theoretically leading it, I learnt so much from others and through that I kept hearing the voice of God over, and over, again, and was drawn more into the presence of Christ.

So, let us journey together as sisters and brothers in Christ, and let our voices be heard above the storm. Amen.