

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE ST JOHN'S, 8.7.18, 9.30 am

Today, I've brought a visual aid . . . this plant (see picture at end) is a cutting from what was a much bigger plant. While we were away last summer, I forgot to ask our friend Pauline, who was house-sitting for us, to water the houseplants, and so they looked very sorry for themselves when we got home! I thought I might be able to save this one, so I took the cutting, and planted it with some rooting powder. It sat there for weeks and weeks and weeks, and didn't do anything! It didn't die, but neither did it grow. Eventually, I tried again with fresh compost and more rooting powder. It sat there for a few more weeks, but eventually I began to think that maybe some new leaves were appearing. Now I'm certain – my plant is definitely growing again!

With any plant, we can't see what's happening beneath the soil. Even during the weeks and weeks that this plant was just sitting on the windowsill, it must have been absorbing water, just to stay alive. There were no roots on it when I transferred it into the fresh compost, but I can only assume that after that, the roots did begin to grow. For another few weeks, there was no outward evidence that my plant was growing, but eventually it was able to absorb enough water and nutrients through its new roots to start growing new leaves as well.

As you might have guessed, I want to draw some parallels between this plant and what's happening in this congregation. I don't want to be too precise, because then the illustration will break down. But to me, the period when I was looking at my plant and thinking that *maybe* some

new leaves were appearing, is very similar to where we seem to be right now.

Two months ago, I issued a call to prayer, and asked you all to pray this prayer each day, ideally at midday. Thank you to each and every one of you who has responded, and has been praying faithfully. As I said two months ago, the Lord acts in response to prayer. We've been praying for comfort as we mourn – I trust that you've experienced the Lord's comfort. We've been praying that we might be filled with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope. I know that I feel much more positive now about the future of this congregation than I did two months ago. We've been praying for guidance as we seek the Lord's vision for the future here. The one person who did take the opportunity to talk to me last week gave me some words which I can only take as the Lord's guidance. We've been praying that the Holy Spirit will breathe into us new life, courage, energy and wisdom, and that we'll each understand the part we have to play in growing this congregation. The great encouragement is that we do have some new people coming along – I hope that you're all doing your best to make them feel welcome. When you come to church, don't just speak to the people you already know well. Look out for those you don't know and go to sit with them instead of in your usual seat. Introduce yourself. If you feel shy about speaking to a stranger, just imagine how that person feels if they come into church for the first, second, third time, and no-one speaks to them! All you need to do to begin is to smile, say 'hallo, it's nice to see you',

and exchange names – you’ve already begun a conversation! Be aware that for some people, service sheets, hymn books, Bibles, and boards at the front with the numbers, are a mystery – watch out for anyone who is struggling to navigate the service, and point them in the right direction. Invite people into your homes for coffee and a chat – or arrange to meet at the coffee shop if you feel more comfortable there. Generally make sure that all feel welcome, that all can begin to feel that they have friends here at St John’s. These are things we can all do to be part of the answer to our own prayers.

But I know you’re wondering what the future holds! Given the way the Lord has been answering our prayer, the Church Council has agreed that we should continue to meet on a Sunday morning. This doesn’t mean that nothing will change – there are some things which have been left on hold until we’d made this decision, which will need to be tackled now.

The first is that this service needs Wardening. Jenny has been very good in continuing to do many of the Warden’s duties since Easter, and I know that some people have been helping out, which is fantastic. But we need to put in some arrangements which are less *ad hoc*. My suggestion is that a small group of people take on the Sunday duties on a rota basis. Three people on a rota would mean one for each Sunday when we have a Communion Service, and they could take it in turns to look after the Morning Prayer, which is much less demanding. Four people would mean that each only needed to commit to one service a month. Pauline has already said that she’s happy to step up on that

basis. Everyone else who would be physically able to do it needs to consider whether they’re willing to do so.

The second issue concerns the need to accommodate the café church congregation in this space each week, as well as this congregation, and Wednesday morning as well. You may or may not be aware that every Sunday afternoon, all the chairs on this side of the church are moved to make space for tables with chairs around them – and then the whole lot is put back after the service. That’s a lot of work, and also adds to the wear and tear, particularly on our chairs. The Church Council has agreed to a compromise. That will mean that the front two rows of chairs are left in place for Sunday and Wednesday mornings, with the tables left up behind them, except when we have a wedding or a funeral coming into church. This (the other) side will remain set up as it is. I trust that you’ll accept that the needs of *all* our congregations need to be met. I believe that this is a reasonable compromise. We’re here to grow the kingdom of God, not only among those who prefer a traditional style of worship, but also among those who prefer the style of the afternoon service. If this arrangement has the effect of encouraging more of you to sit nearer the front, where you’re not distracted by the café set up further back, to my mind, that’s a bonus! I think you’d find that sitting closer together enhances our worship. If we need to put more of the chairs with arms nearer the front, we can do that, of course. What will also need to be worked on is how to store the metal framed chairs which are currently at the back on this side.

The Lord is encouraging us by bringing new people to join our church family. So let's thank him, but also continue to pray and to act for the growth of his kingdom in general, and our own church family in particular. I will aim to have a new prayer card ready for next Sunday, to help you with your prayers.

