

## Back Together

After a year and a half of us all living with lockdowns, social distancing, wearing masks, using hand sanitiser, home working, and having flow tests and vaccinations, many aspects of day-to-day life have now become the new 'normal'.

As we adjust to this, we have started venturing out and enjoying time with others, at theatres, restaurants, concerts, sports events and, of course, church. Each of these environments needs to have provision in place for people to feel safe and that has its own headaches, but being out and about certainly is refreshing.

The other day, I was listening to a discussion on the radio about whether having football fans attend football matches was really necessary and, if so, why? Over the last year there were many matches with no fans in attendance, but the league still took place and matches were played and the wheels kept turning.

There were lots of opinions on both sides, but the one thing they did agree on is that behaviour - on the pitch by the players and by the fans on the stands when they were all together - was different to when they were apart. The sense of togetherness in the stadium created an atmosphere that was unachievable when fans were watching remotely. The team played better, put more in and responded to the encouragement from the fans. The fans generated a sense of camaraderie as they were singing their teams' anthems.

It is said that the Church is the people in it and not the building that we gather in. *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, then I am in the midst of them.* [Matthew 18: v20].

I never really thought about it that much until a few weeks back when we attended the final service at Christ Church, Reddish, which used to be our church many years ago. This church was where Millie and Lola were christened and family memories were made there. Due to many factors exacerbated by the pandemic, it was decided that the church was not viable and that it would close. The congregation numbers had dropped and those still part of the congregation when the decision was made have had to find new places to worship. For some it was easy, but others who have worshipped there for years were unsure of where they would go and felt that they had lost a part of themselves with the church closing. I felt comforted that we were not in that position and had the chance to worship, regardless of the pandemic.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> Christ Church South Manchester opened its doors again and welcomed people to worship. It took us a couple of weeks before we attended in person. Andrea and I had spent the lockdown following the worship sheets and logging into Zoom services but, until I entered the building, I hadn't realised what I had been missing. I found that, over time, worshipping at home wasn't the same, and my faith was starting to lose momentum and focus. I am not sure about others, but I don't find singing the hymns at home my thing, and some versions we listened to didn't really connect with me.

Being present in the church building for the service jump-started my faith and I felt that I left feeling spiritually fed and looking forward to the next service. When the hymns played, it felt natural to join in and celebrate God's word through song with others. The same can be said about Communion; sharing a custard cream with a cup of Ribena just isn't the same as taking Communion together and I am looking forward to this again in church. I felt more connected to God in that one service than in the last 18 months. Seeing everyone lifted

my spirits as it was so nice to see faces in person again and share our faith together as a present congregation.

My personal point of view is that, although it's true that it's the people do make the body of the church, it's also true that, without the building, that body doesn't have a place to call home. The church building works a bit like a lens, gathering the faith of the people in it and focusing the union of faiths that support and feed each other, strengthening our individual faiths and making us whole in person and presence in a way that isn't so easy remotely.

I want to say "Thank you" to everyone who has made the reopening of the building possible. All the worship team, who ensure there are services each week; to the 'chair fairies' who put out and then put away the chairs each week; to the AV team for the technical side of things; to the talent in the people playing the music; to everyone who solves all the problems that arise from holding services in a pandemic, little things can cause big issues; to everyone that makes the brews at the end of the service. And, on top of that, as we have two church buildings, the thanks are due twice over, and also I feel it makes our church twice as special to me.

**Simon Watts**