



HG219: Annual District Church Meeting 2021
God's Promise Of: Community

Psalm 37:1-7a

Home Group Study Notes

18 April 2021 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

What have you most learned about yourself during the
COVID-19 lockdown?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs
of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using
Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon

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Introduction There's no doubt many of us are delighted to be back in church this morning. We've only been open for 12 Sundays out of the last 54. And as I only work on Sunday's I've been twiddling my fingers most of that time! I'm mindful that some of you are not ready to return to physical church and it's great that you are able to watch our livestream today. I'm sure we're all very grateful for the expertise of Richard over the past 12 months. I've said a bit about church life under COVID in my report for the ADCM documents, so I won't repeat myself here, however, it's fair to say that church life changed overnight. We went from being a gathered community to a dispersed community. We went from physical relationships to isolation. And even when we did return to public worship for 12 weeks in September, midweek gatherings weren't permitted, and we had to learn new ways of keeping in touch – both individually and as a church community. There have been many challenges for us a church, personally and for our families.

Snakes & Ladders With all that has been going on these past 12 months, it feels as though we're in a great big game of Snakes and Ladders. We wait to roll a 6. We plod forward, feeling like we're ahead. We climb another ladder. 100, our desired destination, is in sight ... restrictions are lifted, new measures are in place, the R number dropping, social connections rebuilding. Circumstances looked and felt better - even hopeful. Church buildings were reopened. We had climbed a ladder. But then, we hit a giant snake, and down we go, back to where we started, with a soaring R number, we entered Tier 4 and then Lockdown #3 was upon us. And so we start again. This morning we begin a new Home Group series on 'God's Promises from the Psalms' and today we're looking at 'God's Promise of Community' from Psalm 37.

Finding Community It might be an obvious question, but where might community be found when people have multiple existences? I want to suggest there are five:

- **Spiritual:** This may be a church, temple, synagogue or other places of worship.
- **Geographical:** This might be where you live; walk the dog; community centre or shops.
- **Social:** This might be a pub; restaurant; gym and sports clubs.
- **Cultural:** This would include Arts; music; and hobby groups.
- **Professional:** This would be your place of work; school, college or university.

There's no doubt that many, if not most, of these 'physical' networks are in decline – COVID 19 has seen to that. However, another community which has firmly established itself in our lives these past 12 months is the:

Online Community It seems incredible to think that the first website was published on 6 August 1991 when Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. Cyberspace was created and changed the way people live their lives forever – a sociological phenomenon that would be host to a new sphere of communication and community. How would we have managed this past year without YouTube and Zoom and Twitter and Facebook?

But I'm not sure whether this strengthens relationships or creates greater isolation as people network from the seclusion of their own homes.

Baroness Greenfield, Professor of synaptic pharmacology at Oxford University, argues that the increase of virtual technology has impacted on interpersonal relation skills, especially empathy; an increase in recklessness; reduced attention spans; and an increase in information but a lowering of knowledge.

Psychologist Emma Kenny agrees and suggests that “... *people are losing the vital human experience of face-to-face communication, so they'll find it hard to have positive, productive relationships in the future.*” So, the significance of a place, where we actually meet and encounter one another becomes increasingly important in today's post-pandemic world. Some may say that place will be pubs and coffee shops, but why not church?

A Biblical Perspective of Community The Greek word for church is Ekklesia which is where we get the word 'ecclesiastical.' It means 'an assembly' or 'gathering of people.' Meeting together with other Christians, on a regular basis, is central to the Christian faith. The writer of Hebrews urges his readers: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another* (Hebrews 10:25).

There are many examples in the Bible about what it means to be part of a community: Genesis 2:18 teaches that it is not good for us to be alone, that we were created, not only to live in community, but to be at our most fruitful there. Also, the example of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 shows how the early disciples lived as a vibrant and *Transforming Presence* in their community. In Acts 2:42: we read: *They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* And is, in many ways, a model for being church.

Some people compare our current situation with that of the early church, but that is to have a slightly romantic view of the way the first Christians met together and, whilst they also met in homes, they also met in bathhouses, storerooms and cemeteries – anywhere they could! But they met mostly in secret and did so under fear of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and death. An enforced lockdown seems nothing in comparison does it?

Church as Community I'm always interested in the results of surveys on church attendance/trends. One, which caught my eye a few years ago, was a survey about the impact the community of the Church was having on society at large. It was carried out by Professor Cary Cooper of UMIST, and he suggested that people today: because of changing work patterns; longer working hours; moving around the country; loss of family/friends, have such a fragmented social life and are 'desperate' for a sense of community in their lives.

The survey argued that in the ever-changing post-modern society, in which we live, people need a sense of belonging to a wider group of people - from the cradle to the grave; socio-demographic differences etc. - and the survey suggests that church, when it functions well, is the one place where that can be found. A very interesting insight - especially when secular sociologists come to that sort of conclusion. There's no doubt that the world is looking for a place to belong physically/spiritually. Sometimes we don't realize, even appreciate, what the church can give each of us. And this should give us a great deal of encouragement when we consider the significant place the church has, and can have, in community.

This conclusion is supported by the late Jonathan Sachs, the former Chief Rabbi, when he wrote: *Happiness, like friendship, trust, altruism, virtue, enduring values and real relationships, is most readily achieved in community, and in an age when face-to-face communities are elsewhere in steep decline, in houses of worship they are still strong. So, ignore the world of brands and bling, and consider joining a religious congregation. Unlike the culture of glossy surfaces and glittering superficiality, its the real thing.*

There seems to have been three types of gathering in the Bible: the small, the medium-sized and the large. All of equal importance.

Congregation: This refers to the weekly gathering. A place where you feel welcome, a place where your family, if you have one, will fit in. A place where you feel comfortable and where you can grow in faith and become an active church member.

Cell or Home Group. These consist of a small group of people who gather, regularly, in someone's home, to study the Bible, pray, and encourage one another. It is a place where meaningful, and lasting, friendships can be made. It is a place where you can develop your faith in an atmosphere of encouragement and acceptance.

Celebration: This could be said to represent large gatherings, or conferences, such as New Wine or Spring Harvest where 100's/1000's of Christians gather in one place. There's something quite significant about events like this – the critical mass - it helps to restore our confidence when we feel isolated.

For the early Christians there was no such thing as a 'church' building. They put a greater emphasis on *being* the church rather than *going* to church (although they certainly emphasized the importance of meeting together). And with our buildings closed, and public worship on hold, have we, I wonder, discovered God's presence in some surprising places?

The closure of Emmanuel and church activities over the past twelve months has challenged all of us to think more deeply about our Christian faith and the true nature of our worship of God and the role of church in our lives. The greatest challenge of all, is not the loss of familiar church events, but of drifting away from God. It's said that it takes 10 weeks to break a habit and even longer to create a new one. Research suggests that 40% of Church regulars stopped accessing online services after 12 weeks. If that is true, then many church habits have been broken and it will take a long time for us to recover what we have lost during lockdown. Even getting back to a habit of travelling to church for a 10.30 am Sunday service is a challenge. If you're one of those who are struggling, be sure to surround yourself with Christian friends – join a home group - who will walk alongside you on your journey of faith.

Everyone has their own ideas of what they expect the perfect church to be and what they can get out of it. What might the perfect church look like to you? Will you ever find the perfect church? If you do, don't join it! Why? Because you'll spoil it! There's no doubt that involvement in a church community helps to strengthen your faith and enable you to engage with the Christian faith in a meaningful and positive way.

Church as *Communitas* A few years ago, when studying for my M.A., I wrote my dissertation on church as community – it was 20,000 words I could talk for hours on this! Anyway, I came across the word *Communitas* which refers to a communal experience which unites many people together in an unusual way. This *Communitas* usually occurs at a time of great social upheaval, such as that which took place during the London Blitz of World War II or Princess Diana's death or, more recently, living through a worldwide pandemic or the response to the death of the Duke of Edinburgh.

As Christians, we have a wonderful opportunity to engage with our neighbours, family and friends and work colleagues through the experiences we've shared during this pandemic in a way few experiences would. Those of you who've attended our Zoom prayers will have heard me pray regularly for a post-pandemic revival as people search for the answers to their questions about life itself and as Christians share their faith/stories about how God has sustained our faith, and our sanity, during lockdown. What a wonderful and unique opportunity we have before us.

Psalm 37 As Community Psalm 37:3-6 have been life verses for me pretty much ever since I became a Christian. They have sustained me through some very difficult times in my life and ministry and I've often written them on cards or letters to many other people over the years too.

Psalm 37 tells us how we can find our place as a Christian community because it tells us how God is for us – but it involves a partnership:

Trust: *Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture (3).* Faith and trust are verbs, and they involve action - and the reward that comes from God is one of safety and blessing. We trust in God and he protects us, but we also trust in, and draw strength from, each other.

b) Delight: *Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart (4).* What do you delight in? What is your greatest source of pleasure? A decent haircut! To lose those lockdown pounds! A holiday? Or is your delight for people to come to know Jesus?

When we delight in the Lord our desires change and we begin to see what we want and what God wants are different things. We become more aware of God's hand on our lives and his plan for our lives. His heart for the world becomes our heart for the world and then we find ourselves in that place of contentment. What a tremendous God we serve who wants to give each and every one of us what we desire the most. Imagine if God was to give us here at Emmanuel the delight of our hearts? What would that be?

c) Commitment: *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will do this. He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun (5&6).* Deep, satisfying relationships, like marriage, friendship, and discipleship, and the community of the church, require a commitment to the Lord, and to each other. There is a post on our website explaining what it means to be a church member and the commitment we make to God and to each other. Please have a read if you haven't done so already.

The Future Is The Shape Of Things To Come - HG Wells In church history, and in my own experience, God always leads His church out and beyond themselves – through geographical locations, manmade structures, cultural blind spots, etc. He has often led His people in ways, times and into places that surprise us. The same is true for today. Never have we needed to have a strong, united identity and presence. The trouble is, of course, that we don't know what the world will look like after COVID. Isn't that exciting? We talk about a 'new normal' but life will never return to normal. People's habits have changed, the way people work has changed, the place of church in community has changed. We may need a new style of leadership – we certainly need more people willing to serve.

Could this strange, uncharted season, full of challenge and ups and downs, be the much-needed catalyst for us? What might we need to do to revitalise our identity as God's people, to rekindle a deep love for Jesus and a passion for His kingdom, and to grasp and fulfil His purpose for us all for such a time as this as we venture into uncharted territory? As you might expect, I don't have the answers, but I'm asking the questions. We all need to ask questions and can I encourage you to ask these questions in your home group as a starting point. What have we gained but are happy to lose at the end of lockdown? What have we gained and want to keep? What have we lost and don't want back? What have we lost and want to have back? Please let me have a copy of your responses to the matrix under the questions. I look forward to hearing back from you.

A Prayer Living God, draw us deeper into your love; Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve; Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news. Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us and enable us to be a *Transforming Presence* to live your love with generosity and joy, imagination and courage, for the sake of your world and in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

Emmanuel Church Text for 2021

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

Hebrews 6:19



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. Where have you found community over the past 12 months?

2. What has been the greatest challenge to you in sustaining your faith during lockdown?

3. Do you agree with Paul when he says that this *Communitas* experience of a global pandemic is a significant opportunity for mission?

4. What strikes you about church as community from Psalm 37:1-7a?

What have we gained but are happy to lose at the end of lockdown?

What have we gained and want to keep?

What have we lost and don't want back?

What have we lost and want to have back?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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