



SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Small Group notes - Season of Celebration
St Mary's and Sale West
April 2024

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

We are in a season of celebration. As a church we started our 150th anniversary on Palm Sunday and we will be marking and celebrating that in various ways over the next couple of months. Bigger than this is the celebration of Easter and we are currently (at the start of this series) in the Easter season of the church year where we celebrate all the Jesus has won for us through his death and resurrection. The Christian life should be one of celebration of what God has done, is doing and will do.

Life has its struggles, battles and disappointments, yet in the midst of all that there are reasons to celebrate and often it is in the battles that we find the blessings. Celebration is an important part of the rhythm of life for the people of God. God built into the rhythm of his people times and seasons to celebrate together that punctuated the normal routine of life. These days were appointed feasts of the Lord and as they were instituted by God they reflected his character; they spoke of his generosity, provision, justice, salvation and his promises. They looked back to what God had already done for his people and what he would do in the future.

As we look at these festivals we can see how they were also celebrations that point to Jesus. So through this series we will look at the feasts God gave Israel in Leviticus 23 and what they were originally celebrating, and we will look at how they are, or will, be fulfilled in Jesus. We also want to take time for us to look back at what God has done in and amongst us at St Mary's and Sale West Community Church and look forward in hope to the future.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Emmaus Road



SETTING THE SCENE

You may notice that today's passage and theme isn't related to any of the feasts that God instituted, that will kick in properly next week. However, in today's passage Jesus meets two followers after his resurrection who don't recognise him. In conversation Jesus 'explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.' He showed them that what we now call the Old Testament pointed to him and that is a key theme that will run through the rest of the series.

Through this series we want to celebrate what God has done in and through us at St Mary's. It would be good to hear from one or two people each week something significant that God has done for them during their time at St Mary's, (e.g. came to faith, a significant moment that enabled you to go deeper with God, experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit, being baptised or married at St Mary's, a person or group that has encouraged or supported you). It would also be good to share one hope for the future in our church.



READ

Read Luke 24:13-35



DISCUSS

1. Consider some well-known stories of the Old Testament, in what ways do they point to Jesus? Why is it important to read all of scripture through the lens of Jesus?
2. If you have the means, watch and discuss this short film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGFtfqgBQkM>
3. Why do you think Jesus decided to go through all scripture with Cleopas and his friend, giving them what must have been one of the longest sermons ever, instead of just going, 'ta-da!!! It's me!!!' and revealing himself from the start?

4. Have you ever had a moment when you felt a “burning” in your heart while reading the Bible or during a church service? Share your experience.
5. There is significant of research¹ that says that one of the biggest factors to enable a person to ‘grow’ as a disciple is by regularly reflecting on scripture. What steps can you take this week to read the Bible with the intent of recognizing Jesus in its pages? How can develop reflecting scripture into a habit? (or share your own journey if you have)



PRAY

Cleopas and his friend started their journey but ended with joy and hearts on fire. Pray for one another that wherever we are on our spiritual journey, that our risen Jesus will set our hearts on fire with love for him.

¹Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Sabbath: Celebrating rest and rescue



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

In Leviticus 23 God appointed festivals for Israel to observe. Just as the rhythm of our church year is based around things like Christmas, Easter, New Wine summer conference... Israel have a rhythm to their year. Moments that broke into the regular ordinary running of life to stop, look back and give thanks for what God has done and to look forward in hope.

This week we look at the first of these festivals, which is not an annual celebration but a weekly one. This has been described as one of the great innovations of Israel; where others shaped their calendar around the lunar cycle creating months Israel divided into weeks which had nothing to do with the moon. We will look at what it is looking back at and celebrating, and how this weekly festival is fulfilled in Jesus.

What is your current understanding of Sabbath?

Is Sabbath something that is part of the rhythm of your life or not?



READ

Read Leviticus 23:1-3 & Deuteronomy 5:15



DISCUSS

1. What do these passages tell us that the purpose of Sabbath is. What is being remembered/celebrated?
2. Read Colossians 2.16-17, as followers of Jesus, what is our relationship with Sabbath now? What do you think these verses are saying? Is Sabbath still something we should do? What does it mean that the reality of Sabbath is found in Christ?
3. So as Israel looked back and celebrate how God created the world and rested and how God rescued them from Egypt, we look back and celebrate those things but we also celebrate that our rest and rescue are ultimately found in Jesus now and look forward to when we will fully experience rest and rescue. With this in mind how do you feel we should celebrate practice today as a community and individuals?
4. What are the obstacles that get in the way of your practicing Sabbath? Either practically or emotionally?



PRAY

Spend sometime praying around the topic of rest and rescue and thank God his faithfulness over the last 150 years of St Mary's Church

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Passover: Celebrating freedom



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

So we come to the second of the appointed festivals but the first annual one. The accounts of the first Passover and how it should be marked in the future are recorded in Exodus 12. It is not the plan, in this study, to go through that passage but if there are a few people in the group who are unfamiliar with the event then it might be good to look at it together.

In Egypt, blood of a lamb was smeared around the door posts and the angel of death passed over and did not kill the firstborn, this event led to the freedom of Israel. So Jesus, the divine lamb, shed his blood for us on the cross, so that 'death' will pass over us and we are free.



READ

Read Leviticus 23:4-5



DISCUSS

1. What was Passover celebrating? You might want to skim Exodus 12.
2. For us Communion has evolved from the Passover, how is the Passover fulfilled in Jesus? You might want to look at Jesus' own

words in Luke 22:14-20.

If you have the means and time then this 6min video from Bible Project on 'The Day of the Lord' draws on some of these themes:
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/day-of-the-lord/>

3. The Lord's Supper/Communion compels us to look back and remember what Jesus has done for us. It also causes us to look forward with great anticipation of the day when we will see Jesus face to face, Luke 22:16 & 18. When you take communion, if you do, what are you thinking/contemplating? What is your understanding of what is going on? Is it the first Passover and the freedom of God's people, Jesus death on the cross and freedom from sin, is it looking forward to when we get to share it with Jesus in the great heavenly banquet? Is it none of these things? Do you think it will be different the next time you receive?
4. Part of the Passover and Communion celebration is about freedom. How free do you feel as follower of Christ, what does that look like and what do you think freedom looks like when the kingdom of God is fully revealed?



PRAY

Spend sometime praying into the theme of freedom for one another and people you care about. Also thank God for those who have pointed you to finding freedom in Jesus.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Unleavened Bread: Celebrating redemption



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

The feast of unleavened bread is linked to Passover. Israel, because they had to be ready leave Egypt quickly, were told to bake bread without yeast as they would not have time to allow it to rise. Anyone who preferred to wait for their bread to rise showed that their heart was still in Egypt. Yeast therefore is a sign of worldliness and spiritual compromise. Israel, before celebrating this festival, had to rid their house of all yeast as a sign of not compromising. There is no equivalent festival for Christians but it is a reminder that we should be quick to obey God's will, that we should have our hearts and eyes on the kingdom rather than the world, and that we should examine ourselves and throw away our corrupting influences.

In this series we have been looking back at what God has done and looking forward to what he will do. This week will break that format of celebration but with all that in mind we will look at how we live as distinctive followers of Jesus.



READ

Read Leviticus 23:6-8 & 1 Corinthians 5:6-8



DISCUSS

The following discussion will focus on the Corinthians passage. This passage brings up four important 'oughts' of the Christian life.

As a group take time to discuss and pray about these. Asking the question for each of:

- how is this lived out day to day
 - what are the challenges of living it out
 - what things can we put in place to help us 'live with unleavened bread' (not compromising to worldly values)
1. Christians ought to be quick to follow God's will.
 2. Christians ought to be pilgrim people, making spiritual progress and not settling for spiritual complacency.
 3. Christians ought to regularly examine their lives and throw out corrupting influences.
 4. Christians ought to feed on nutritious food of truth not junk food of compromise.



PRAY

Spend sometime praying into the things you have been talking about, especially for the people who have set good examples to you as to what Christian discipleship looks like.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Firstfruits: Celebrating resurrection



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

The Feast of the Firstfruits was given to anticipate the time when Israel will reach the promised land, then it was used as a harvest celebration. In giving God the firstfruits of the harvest they were acknowledging that God was the source of all good things, that everything actually belongs to God. The later crop is guaranteed by the firstfruits. In the New Testament both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are referred to as the Firstfruits. Jesus was the firstfruits of those who had fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:20), the full harvest of the resurrection is yet to come but Jesus is the guarantee and the Holy Spirit is the Firstfruits (Romans 8:23), a foretaste, the first instalment of our future glory. He is God's pledge of more to come in our resurrection life.



READ

Read Leviticus 23:9-14



DISCUSS

1. This feast was given while Israel were still in the desert in anticipation of entering the promised land. Why do you think God gave them the instruction on how to celebrate this feast at this point, while they were still living in tents and eating manna?

2. Exodus 23:19 encouraged Israel to bring their best to God. The closest we have to the Firstfruit festival is Harvest and even that has become disconnected from the reality of our daily living. How do we today continue this principle of acknowledging everything we have comes from God and what does bringing our best look like for us in 2024?
3. The Feast of Firstfruit also pointed to Jesus. Read 1 Corinthians 15:16-26, how is Paul linking Jesus to this feast?
4. Can you imagine the Israelites in the desert dreaming of one day being able to settle and the joy of planting their own crops and then the joy of harvesting the firstfruits and the promise that the firstfruit is for more crop to follow. How does that resonate with us as followers of Jesus and our own resurrection?



PRAY

Spend some time praying into what you have been talking about. Thank God for the people who have invested their best into St Mary's over the last 150 years with their money to build the church and sustain mission and ministry as well as their time and talents.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Pentecost: Enjoying fullness of life



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

When God gave this festival it was known as the Feast of Weeks because it counted on seven weeks from the previous festival. By the time of Jesus it was known as Pentecost.

At this festival loaves of bread were baked with yeast as an offering (along with other animals). The yeast this time symbolises not sin but the arrival in the promised land; they did not have time for yeast at the exodus but now they have plenty of time, bread with yeast is symbolic of the redeemed life, the promised land, the new creation. Firstfruits marked the start of the harvest, Pentecost marked the end.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out at this celebration the church was born and there was an incredible spiritual harvest that day. Pentecost for Israel also became a celebration of the giving of the Torah, the law, and the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection is seen as a fulfilment of God saying he will write his law on our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Ezekial 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33)



READ

Read **Leviticus 23:15-22**



DISCUSS

1. What did the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) initially represent? What were they celebrating? Why do you think God chose this celebration to be the moment he sent the Holy Spirit?

Read Acts 2:1-21, it is a very familiar passage so listen out for what God makes stand out to you this time. Maybe even read it in a different translation to remove some of the familiarity.

2. What has been your personal experience of the Holy Spirit? How do you understand His role in your life?
3. How conscious are you in your daily life of being filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit? How can you be more open to seeing, hearing, and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit in your day to day life?



PRAY

Spend some time praying for one another to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. Pray too for our church, and the wider church, that we will be a people filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit and a continued witness to all in our community from every background.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Trumpets: Anticipating Jesus' return



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

There does not appear to be a related Christian festival linked to the Festival of Trumpets. This feast later got rolled into Rosh Hashanah, which, although taking place in the seventh month, is like a new year celebration marking the beginning of the agricultural year.

The distinctive of this celebration is the blast of a trumpet (ram's horn). In Exodus 19 the sound of trumpets indicated God had descended on the mountain. In 1 Thessalonians 4 and Revelation 11 the sound indicates Christ's return. So, this festival is linked to celebrating the presence of God and it also points to a day when Jesus will return.

Have you ever had an experience when you felt the Lord was particularly near to you? What were the circumstances? How did you know it was God?



READ

Read Leviticus 23:23-25 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18



DISCUSS

1. There are many details about Jesus' second coming which the Bible does not tell us but what details are revealed in this Thessalonians passage?

2. When we grieve we are not to grieve as those who have no hope, how would you describe the hope we have? How does this contrast with some popular views of life after death?
3. The return of Jesus is something which should define and shape how we view and live our lives but mostly it doesn't. What can we change in our actions and thinking to live more in this reality?
4. Re-read 1 Thess. 4:16-18 a few times slowly. Allow that image to dwell in your mind. What thoughts, emotions, feelings... arise within you as you take on these words?



PRAY

Spend some time in prayer praising God for the certainty of Jesus return and the gift of hope. As our discussions focus now on the future let's pray for the future of St Mary's church and the things we feel God is currently calling us to invest in.

This week please pray for our 3 church plants/worshipping communities (revitalising Sale West, All Nations and Sale Central) as well as the 'Myriad' learning community we facilitate for 6 other churches.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Atonement: Anticipating the renewal of all things



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

Jesus is the sacrifice whose blood was taken and he is the one on whom sin was laid and sent away. These sacrifices weren't just for the cleansing of people but also the cleansing of the tabernacle/ temple and the whole physical community. If defiled people had been there then the whole place was unclean; this celebration was for the forgiveness of sins and the purification of the temple. They point to what Jesus did on the cross and continue to point to him in that he will cleanse the whole of creation at the renewal of all things.



READ

Read **Leviticus 23:26-32 & Hebrews 9:24-28**

DISCUSS

Watch this video which helps to link these two passages together:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_OIRWGLdnw&t=395s

1. Discuss together what stands out from what you have just watched and heard.
2. The video talks about how when people neglect to act with peace, justice, and love, it wreaks havoc - we call this evil. What is one way our relationships and the surrounding environment suffer from evil?



3. To rid the world of evil God would have to rid us. How does Jesus' sacrifice deal with this. What does animal sacrifice represent? What is one way that Jesus is a more perfect sacrifice? (The whole chapter of Hebrews 9 is good to read at some point)



PRAY

What has Christ already done and what are we waiting for him to do? Spend sometime praying into these things.

As we look forward into life in our church please pray for the foundations we are laying for future generations, starting with our children and youth ministry.

SEASON OF CELEBRATION

Tabernacles: Anticipating our true home



CATCHING UP

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SETTING THE SCENE

For this last feast, The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), called Sukkoth by the Jewish people today, Israel had to build and live in shelters for a week - a reminder of their time in the desert and a celebration of how God provided for them and protected them. By the time of Jesus other elements had been added: a water and a light ceremony. It is in this context that Jesus taught that he provides living water and that he is the light of the world (John 7 & 8).

This feast was an important reminder to Israel, now that they lived in comfort, that it was God who rescued them and that they were in the land because of the Lord and not their own self-sufficiency. Again, it points to Jesus' rescue, that we are reliant on him and not self-sufficient, to prevent us from being spiritually complacent. Our hope is in God and the new creation, not in material possessions on earth. We are pilgrim people, this is not our permanent home, but we look forward to the future where we will dwell (tabernacle) with God forever.



READ

Read Leviticus 23:33-44

DISCUSS



1. Can you remember a time when God took care of you and provided for you in a special way like he took care of Israel as they travelled in the wilderness? What did you learn in that time?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-5. Discuss the imagery used here of our lives now and what we are waiting for in Jesus. What is it telling us?
3. Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7okN0nGxAM4> What did you learn from this video, what stood out to you and why?
4. How easy is it for you, and what are the challenges, to think about this as a temporary home? Does this future with God excite you, give comfort, give peace, or is it too abstract to entertain....?
5. At the time of Jesus, this was the biggest feast. It was a joyful celebration and held the kind of place that Christmas does in our society today. What are the benefits of celebrating together as Christians? Why do you think God gave Israel these feasts? What are the celebrations we have or should have in our calendar? Do you think we celebrate enough what God has done, is doing and will do? How do we respond to this?

PRAY

As we finish this series, spend some time in celebration of all God has done, is doing and will do. Pray for one another and the church as a whole that we will be a community that helps people find living water that Jesus offers.