

¹Rob, a servant of Jesus by the grace of God.

To some of the saints from Stockport (and even Timperley!) who follow the gospel.
Grace to you all and profound peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Creator God's love towards His world is amazing.

That He should reveal Himself through His Son², and in His kindness make *us*, now, alive with Jesus is breathtaking, and breath-giving³.

The gospel good news that we enjoy is revolutionary, transforming, and incredibly cool.

All of this is about Him.

His plan, His eternal purpose, His magnificent glory, honour, power and strength⁴.

And He loves you.

He forgives you.

He accepts you, and He will transform you⁵.

"He knows the depths of your heart, and He loves you the same."⁶

So, know that you are loved.

Know that because of Jesus You are completely forgiven.

Know that in Jesus you are accepted into God's family⁷, without reservation.

You know, deep down, that for you there are some future changes needed - He's perfectly aware, too!

You see, this good news is far more than a "I'm OK, you're OK"

It's more like : "I am in Jesus! - amazing - and if I can get in, then so can you!"

Even me - so, even you!

And I pray that each of you will continue to enjoy God's grace for yourselves, and to experience the greatness of God working through you for His pleasure⁸.

For you already know the answer to the ultimate 'murder mystery', the supreme whodunnit? - that through that Easter weekend, God perfectly expressed his eternal plan to unite all things in Jesus⁹.

¹ see separate comments on my style of approach here - there is no intention here to mock or offend!

² Hebrews 1:1

³ Ephesians 2:4-7

⁴ Revelation 7:12

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁶ Indescribable, Chris Tomlin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fgen24eKiM>

⁷ Ephesians 1:5

⁸ Philippians 2:13

His death was once and for all¹⁰.

And "all" includes you.

So continue to remind one another and your own soul, of the foundation of God's grace, of Jesus as the Cornerstone, and of His Spirit as your guide.

Speak of it, pray of it - sing of it - for longer than you think necessary.

God's truth sets you free.

And His Spirit will strengthen you from within by His power.

In His strength, you can live the life that has already been won for you.

So, let me offer you a few practical encouragements as you move forward together:

consider the local church as priority

Having served here as a leader for 10 years, perhaps it's no surprise that I would mention this!

Far more significantly, Jesus loved the church and gave himself for his bride¹¹; His body of believers gathering together - in devotion, community, and mission.

We live at a time of massive variety in church expression, with different, often low levels of engagement, and a prevailing culture where commitment is regarded with suspicion. Be counter-cultural!

Ask yourself what you understand church to be. It's a big deal.

I would encourage you to regard *local church as the primary expression of Christianity for any believer*, and the primary means for discipleship, service and mission in the world. And, incredibly, through His church God reveals His wisdom¹².

By giving yourself to God, and by serving from a church base, you are putting yourself humbly in the best place for your character to flourish.

I wonder how many of you are in this room because of the wise words or actions of your friends here - who have demonstrated something of God's love for you.

Today, of course, perhaps I preach to the converted!

Local church may not be perfect, but Jesus said He will build His church¹³.

⁹ Ephesians 1:9

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:14

¹¹ Ephesians 5:25

¹² Ephesians 3:10

¹³ Matthew 16:18, Psalm 127:1

It will be full of *different* people,
inconvenient, funny, frustrating, relaxing, familiar, always changing,
a place with mixed memories, fresh faces, wounded soldiers, sibling banter,
and faith for the future, special moments, raw emotion,
and there will be the life of God
a healthy place where character and gift can develop

and it will be messy and that's OK
and there may be misunderstandings and mistakes and that's OK
there will be new believers to help, older believers to encourage, wild ideas to
correct¹⁴, and brave, bold steps to take
and that's exciting, mostly!

And it will mean that you will need to forgive - again, and again, and again . .
Just like Jesus taught his disciples to pray¹⁵.
Remember that Christianity was fiercely multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-class, and
multi-cultural from the start.

So continue to welcome *everyone* warmly, serve humbly¹⁶,
love authentically
for you being a real, loving community is a huge part of the message in our world of
un-social media.
Any person's carefully manicured public presence is no substitute for private
kindnesses that only our Heavenly Father sees¹⁷.
Let each of you serve / help in some way, let all of you be served, and equip each
other for more serving¹⁸.
Don't think any less of yourself, just think of yourself less!

Let the local church occupy your thoughts and prayers - and you will be caring for
Christ's body¹⁹ - his limbs, washing his feet - as you share your lives.
Let your communal worship be a place where the vulnerable are safe, and the secure
are inspired.

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 4:2

¹⁵ Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4

¹⁶ Philippians 2:3

¹⁷ Matthew 6:5

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:12

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:23-13

continue to walk as people of the Word and Spirit

Love God's Word - the bible - get to know it well - and continually follow the prompting of the Spirit. Expect BOTH whenever you meet together

If you started out 'wordy', expect more prompting of the Spirit as you mature. If you started out with Spirit encounters, let them lead you to explore the Book more²⁰.

Remember that those who serve in teaching will be judged with greater strictness²¹.

Our world needs confident, biblical, Spirit-inspired believers to explain this wonderful grace. Any caricatures of Christian faith can be answered by informed gospel honesty. Beware 'prophecy' that merely fuels future optimism, but cherish prophecy that builds up the church²².

Those who are more mature, please serve the next generation - they will thrive with the support and encouragement of older brothers and sisters²³, not with assessments of semi-detached consultants. Let still-tongued mercy triumph over opinionated judgement²⁴.

seek Kingdom partnerships from a church base

More tentatively, I would like to suggest that the UK church's future may well look more non-denominational. Many Christians are already post-denominational with countless young believers blissfully unaware of, and uninterested in, the network to which their local church belongs.

For SFC, as one of the 'newer churches', this isn't new news.

Whilst that may be the trend, remember that having a church network, with outside input and accountability is important. Particularly at times like these, during a leadership transition, I am glad that Gary and Martin have the support of many others in ChristCentral and Newfrontiers, (GW, GA, RC, PB, others) who will be supporting the church, praying, and speaking here over coming months.

Also, remember that relationship with other local churches is healthy, with events such as Renew Prayer (Tuesday), and Mission24 / Love Stockport (June).

You are part of a larger, Kingdom thing that God is doing. His Spirit inevitably brings worshippers together to make disciples. Build from the unity you already have²⁵.

²⁰ 2 Tim 3:16

²¹ James 3:1

²² 1 Cor 4:3

²³ Titus 2:1-8

²⁴ James 2:13

²⁵ Ephesians 4:3

As the church ecosystem changes, keep your focus. Be clear on biblical priorities rather than church traditions (even your own).

See yourself not as a franchise of a 'hard' denomination but a local expression of a generous-hearted Kingdom vision and values.

Be deeply gracious with others, know your own distinctive convictions, and recognise that it is possible to disagree, agreeably.

"in necessary things unity; in uncertain things liberty; in all things charity"²⁶.

Tread carefully as your church leaders guide you.

Be aware that, sadly, some see the church - either locally, or in joint gatherings - as a place merely to market their wares. Listen between the lines, for God may overturn their stalls in the temple at any moment²⁷.

You can usually tell those who are truly committed to a local church - they attend regularly, make friends there, and give regularly to it.

Always be looking outwards

The great commandment²⁸ - loving the Lord your God with everything you have, and your neighbour as yourself is the fuel for the great commission²⁹ - go and make disciples of all nations. Always look to make disciples, and to encourage them.

Be on the front foot with the gospel of peace with diligence, gentleness, and respect³⁰.

Jesus is no relic from the ancient world. He is our post-modern world's best hope.

Be bold in taking and making opportunities, in the face of inevitable opposition and trouble. Work, pray, suffer and take risks together on His mission.

Like the sower in the parable³¹, keep throwing out seed.

Look for those who will be saved, and added into God's church³².

Take care not to so overreact to preachers with an over-realised end-times that you become risk-averse and see too little of God's Kingdom breaking out.

Even those secure in their Godly identity may need to change.

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_necessariis_unitas,_in_dubiis_libertas,_in_omnibus_caritas

²⁷ Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18

²⁸ Matthew 22

²⁹ Matthew 28

³⁰ 1 Peter 3:14-15

³¹ Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8

³² Acts 2:47

Be people who take colourful steps of faith - whatever your ages, avoid becoming 50 shades of grey (in any sense of that phrase!).

Expect risk, tiredness, and profound demonstrations of Kingdom life today.
Let your focus be: to live out fully this new life you've been given.

Be people in love with God first and His church,
be people of 'word and spirit', looking to the wider Kingdom - followers with spiritual nous, costly integrity, mission focus, and unstoppable, Godly energy.

And so I echo to you three elements: in, out and up
in - to lovingly care for and serve one another,
out - to reach people in any way you can, and
up - to worship God wholeheartedly.
And the greatest of these is UP³³.

Seek God for yourself every day.

As Sarah and I leave, we would like to thank everyone in the church for their support and prayers, and ask you all to continue to pray for us, particularly as we relocate. We'll continue to pray for you, too - and unlike 1C times - we're at least able to stay in touch electronically, by phone, or even with a 90 minute car drive up the M6.

His Grace be with us all³⁴.

And to him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.³⁵

³³ 1 Cor 13:13

³⁴ 1 Tim 6:21

³⁵ Jude 24-25