

‘My trust in God deepened because of the pandemic’

Julia Gay used lockdowns to study, read the Bible and pray, enabling her Christian faith to grow in uncertain times



Julia Gay outside St Mary's Church, Portchester

FOR some, the Covid pandemic has been a time when faith has been tested. But for Julia Gay, it's been a time for a genuine relationship with God to blossom.

She was just starting to discover more about the Christian faith when the first lockdown hit. She had to learn to read the Bible, pray and find answers to questions largely by herself. Attending digital services helped too.

But those times when she's felt a real connection to God and a glimpse of a spiritual world have often happened when she has been alone and in prayer.

Now she's written a booklet of reflections that chart her deepening faith throughout the past two years. It's called 'The Missing Ingredient', making it clear that faith in God was the one thing previously missing from her life.

"We often have a missing ingredient in our lives," she said. "Sometimes what we try works and sometimes it doesn't. The Covid 19 pandemic has given us the opportunity to re-evaluate what we need from life. It may

feel like a punishment at times, but I believe it is an opportunity."

Julia, now 58, has lived in Portchester for 11 years, working as a careers adviser. She would often walk around Portchester Castle, sometimes striding through the churchyard and sometimes stopping for tea and cake in the church's tea room.

Religion wasn't part of her life. Her parents hadn't gone to church and neither did any of her friends.

'I sobbed loudly - as if I needed to let something painful out'

Yet she did believe in some kind of higher power. She had tried Taoism, meditation, yoga and pagan beliefs, which she found interesting, but never felt truly connected to whatever it was she was seeking.

She went to music events and carol services in church and even a theology group to ask questions about faith and science. Sometimes she set off with the

intention of going to a Sunday service, but carried on walking past St Mary's.

"I knew that if I went in, I'd have to make a commitment one way or the other to God," she said. "Either I would open my heart to him, or I would reject him. I knew deep down that I would not do the latter, and that opening my heart to him would be hard.

"Then when I did go to church services, I would hear something in the sermon that I could relate to, but also something that I felt conflicted about.

"And I felt such emotion during the service. I wanted to sob loudly - and one time, I did. It was as though I needed to let something very painful out.

"I think I felt the Holy Spirit, which allowed the healing to begin. I prayed and asked for forgiveness, but wondered if it was really helpful to revisit my sins to be forgiven.

"Then, one morning as I sat reflecting on my thoughts, I suddenly saw everything in a different way. Repenting did not

mean I had to feel bad about things I'd done forever. I could let go of the hurt.

"If God loved me and forgave me, then I could forgive myself and still accept responsibility for my past actions. This would allow me to move forward in a much more productive way than guilt.

"I could feel God smiling down on me, and I sensed that he always knew I would begin to understand. I said my first real prayer, and I knew it was heard. And then Covid happened. Lockdown started and life seemed to stop."

She decided to use the initial lockdown as an opportunity to read the Bible, explore prayer at home, and take part in digital worship. The imposition of Covid rules - and some people's inability to stick to them - served as a helpful metaphor for the way that all humanity disobeys God. And

on Easter Saturday 2020, she decided to let Jesus into her life.

"I suddenly had a vision in my mind's eye of my front door opening, and Jesus had entered and will be here now and forever," she said.

"I felt that I was gaining more wisdom by studying the Bible, praying and going to church than anything I'd previously done. The pandemic might have been a time when others were doubting their faith, but it was the opposite for me."

Among many ways in which St Mary's digital services helped was one day when she was walking to hospital for the results of tests. Not only was the teaching relevant, but she realised she was being prayed for in the intercessions. The test results were clear, and her faith was strengthened.

This was the kind of entry she was

making into her ongoing journal, which has turned into the 'Missing Ingredient' booklet, and which she hopes might help others. Although she has written material before, she has never shared it publicly.

Julia also experienced many of the stresses and anxieties relating to the pandemic. Previously she had found meditation and reflection helpful in times of trouble and would talk to a 'higher power'. She never got an answer. Now that she was praying to God, he would answer her.

"I have never doubted there was something more," she said. "I always felt there was something missing for me, and I knew it was something spiritual. It almost feels that I have had an experience of this 'other world'. It is beyond the realm of my senses.

"The best I can come up with is to describe it as an internal 'knowing' that was given to me and received in a part of me that has been dormant up until now. I have received a sense of what and where God is that defies all my senses.

"Was a relationship with God the missing ingredient in my life? Yes, but it takes more than throwing all the right ingredients in a bowl and hoping for the best.

"The recipe for any good relationship is about method as well as ingredients. It takes practice to get the method right."

● **'The Missing Ingredient: Reflections on Finding Faith during the Pandemic' is now available at St Mary's Church and tea room, inside Portchester Castle.**