

*I'm going to ask James to tell us a bit about what first attracted you to the church.*

Well, I came to the church without any background growing up at all. I've got a Malay Muslim mum and an agnostic British dad and to be honest, we just all agreed it was easier for the wider family if we just kept away from the whole faith topic. Sure enough, I went to London Study Uni and was given a copy of the God Delusion and like any science student, read the argument that Richard Dawkins put forward and thought, 'Yeah, great. That's a good argument. I'll park that' and I had a wonderful 20s, to be honest. Yeah, it was great. My ex-partner worked for Harrods and Waitrose, and I loved the discount and all those wonderful material things. But I always knew it didn't really stack up entirely. And that really became evident all of a sudden when I met my partner Joel (who's also in the Minster choir) on a, believe it or not, on a night out clubbing in Manchester on Canal Street. He took me back to his village just south of Gloucestershire, where there was a great church choir there - with very 'Vicar of Dibley' vibes. I loved it. It was not what I was familiar with for the last decade, having done what most people do in London - living in sealed boxes, not knowing your neighbours at all.

I joined in watching him singing in the church choir a couple of weekends and I quickly got FOMO, a fear of missing out, and wanting to be up in the choir singing with him (not that I had any singing experience, but I'm a bit competitive, and I thought, well, I can do that, I can have a go at that). They very graciously let me into the choir and very quickly, after three or four weeks, maybe a couple of months, of enjoying singing with this choir in early 2020, I quickly asked the question, 'Well, hold on a minute, if I'm singing these wonderful mass settings and all the lovely anthems that they're doing - A, at the very least, do I understand what I'm singing here? And B, actually even better, do I believe it? How can I stand up here and sing if I don't believe what I'm singing?' I went to the vicar at the time who gave me a couple... (The thing is, at least the kids in our Minster choir are quite lucky that they do church awards and get taught all this stuff about what they're singing and what's the liturgical background behind it. But as a newbie adult to it, actually, I was feeling a way in the dark a bit.) ... So, I remember asking the vicar at the time, and he gave me a couple of leaflets - they were okay: one of them said, 'Say you love Jesus'. I was like, 'Whoa, back off. I'll make my own mind up about it if I love Jesus, thank you very much.'

Then COVID happened, and it all came to a stop for a summer while Joel and I took a recess, and we decided 'Right, we'll move up to Yorkshire for new jobs and all that stuff.' I started to slowly carry on that journey of piecing together what this church music at least, and the church stuff was all about. A bit with the help of York Minster - I still go to morning prayer before work, which is a nice ritual to start the day. - I got to know Canon Maggie there who helped me piece together some of the logical bits about religion rather than faith. And the same with our church - we live just south of Pocklington - quite high church, bells, occasional smells, but together they helped me understand what happens on a Sunday. It was really when I came to Beverley Minster that I filled in the last bit before I was scaily happy to stand in front of my family and my Muslim mum and say, 'Yeah, this is my faith. This is what I believe in.'

And part of it was, well, how we found our way into Beverley Minster was still a year on, determined to win at music, I naturally booked my grade two piano exam in the Parish Hall. And I went to speak to Robert, and Joel thought I was absolutely bonkers. But I said, Hey, Robert, I've got three months singing experience. Do you want to let me into your Cathedral choir? I

think I distracted him enough for train chat - I work for the railways. But he took pity on me and I've actually had a great time singing in the choir ever since. But it also introduced me to Jonathan and Wendy, the previous Associate Vicar, that many of you will know. She's wonderfully inclusive. I was able to answer off those final discussions with her about, Well, hold on a minute. Can I be gay and a Christian? Can I sign up to this faith without being a hypocrite? Does this all add up?

We squared the circle and it was great and so my due diligence on whether I can sign up to this faith was fine. I got confirmed along with Joel in York Minster and that's when the hard bit really began - how do I build a relationship with God?

And this is where, by virtue of working my way in through the music and carrying out questioning every anthem we sing, what's the history behind that? - and joining a house group with Jane and the wonderful worship band as well as doing my church music and all that stuff - all these various random bits around the Minster (because there's so much going on here) have helped me to start to... well, the different musical styles have always given me a space to find that right dialogue with God. And by bouncing off with Jane and others, it's given me the opportunity to start to figure out, 'Well, how do I bring him into my everyday life' - at work when I'm dealing with a 'grace-grower or something, or dealing with a difficult personal decision, - How can I lean into him and that stuff.

That's how church has worked out for me for the first three years or so.