

St James'
17th March 2019; 10am
Developing a culture of welcome, invitation and belonging

Leviticus 19:18,33-34

Ephesians 3:14-19

Matthew 25:31-46

A story....

Obadiah Smith, long-standing Churchwarden at St Wimple's, stood on the chancel steps, surveyed the church, and checked his watch. Thirty minutes to kick-off – "I mean the start of the service", he corrected himself rapidly.

He was slightly concerned that the new minister hadn't arrived yet. He'd have thought they would be in good time for their welcome service. But then he reminded himself that there wasn't much for them to do beforehand. He and his fellow warden, Amos Jones, prided themselves on running a pretty well-organised ship - "I mean Church," he corrected himself again.

And indeed the church ladies had done a wonderful job of cleaning and polishing the old building. Apparently, Mrs Smudge had even scrubbed the long flight of steps leading up to the front door from the street below.

He wasn't that fussed about the steps, but he was pleased to see that the disastrous mess of chewed crayons and screwed up paper that had passed as a Children's Corner for the past 10 years had finally been consigned to the dustbin, and had been replaced by a gleaming brass vase.

Amos joined him on the chancel step and they briefly congratulated each other for turning on the heating 30 minutes earlier than usual. Already they could barely see the breath in front of their faces, and by the time the service began it would be almost warm in the pews.

"I think it will be seen as a welcoming gesture," Amos muttered, as the early arrivals began to drift into the building, gather in their usual huddles and take up their regular seats.

The calm of the building was suddenly shattered by a dreadful bumping and thumping noise from the steps, followed by the firm tones of Mrs Jemima Fotheringay stating "Well, we will see what the churchwardens have to say about that" as she stormed across the threshold, scattering assembling sidesmen before her as she began her progress up the aisle.

"Mr Smith. Mr Jones. Will you kindly come and advise this, this bag lady, who has taken up residence half way up our front steps, that we have an important service this morning, and that she needs to move herself and her belongings off our

property. I virtually had to step over her to get in to church this morning. I don't know what the country is coming to." She seated herself firmly in her usual pew and began to fan herself with her hand.

A sidesman ran up and handed her a hymn book and service sheet.

"Could I have books as well please?" asked a pleasant looking lady at the far end of the pew. Mrs Fotheringay turned her head slowly and lowered her glasses to the end of her nose.

"You should have picked them up from the sidesmen as you entered," she advised coldly. "And I am afraid I will have to ask you to move as this pew is reserved."

The source of the dreadful bumping and thumping now came into view. A young man, accompanied by a scruffy child about six years old, had pulled a double buggy up the steps and was now manoeuvring it into the church. He pushed the buggy down the central aisle and took a seat on the right near the back.

"We'll be able to see her when she comes in," he told the scruffy child, as he released an equally untidy-looking three year old from one of the buggy seats and a small baby from the other. The baby took a deep breath and began to howl. The man reached into a bag, produced a bottle and proceeded to feed the infant.

Mrs Fotheringay noticeably winced as the scruffy child addressed the man as Josh, rather than Dad, asking him where the children's activity bags were, and the younger child asked him loudly where the toilet was. The young man looked round for help, but everyone was deep in conversation and only Obadiah and Mrs Fotheringay noticed. "One of those broken families, I shouldn't wonder," she opined loudly to Miss Harris. "So much for God's call to be foster parents," the young man muttered under his breath.

After that, things became a bit of a blur for Obadiah. The pleasant lady asked the sidesmen for books and enquired whether there would be gluten-free bread at communion. An older gentleman came in and enquired about the hearing loop, and his wife asked for a large-print service sheet. The regulars entered, muttering loudly about the unwelcome guest on the steps, and Amos's failure to move her on. The sidesmen looked more and more perplexed.

He checked his watch. Two minutes to go. Where was the minister? Where was Amos?

He rapidly moved the buggy to make space for the choir who were assembling in the aisle ready for the procession.

Start time!

Amos entered the church, blushing deeply, accompanied by the bag lady. To Obadiah's utter astonishment, she removed her very disreputable coat to reveal clerical robes beneath it. She swung into place at the end of the procession, announced the first hymn, and processed serenely down the aisle. "Mummy!" shouted the little girl as she passed.

The new minister turned at the top of the aisle.

"Good morning, St Wimple's and thank you for your welcome. In a few minutes I will be speaking on Matthew 25 v 35 – "I was a stranger and you welcomed me", but first, let us pray....."

So – of course, that was all made up.

Apart from the idea of the new minister dressing up as a homeless person to make a point to the congregation, which I have stolen from somewhere else.

And it's a parody, of course – but one designed to make us think.

Because today we are thinking about how we develop a culture of welcome, invitation and belonging, and that is quite challenging.

So let's begin at the beginning, and remind ourselves why we are here.

We are here because God has invited us.

There is no-one this building this morning who God does not love with a love so profound that, in Jesus, God was strung up on a cross to die so that we could accept that invitation.

God welcomes us.

And essentially what St Paul was writing to the Christians in Ephesus in our NT reading, was his prayer that they (and indirectly, us) would catch hold of this vision of God's love, which is beyond human comprehension – and be transformed by it.

For it is very clear throughout the Bible that God's love is not to be kept to ourselves – it is to be lived out, and that God's welcome is for everyone, not just those like ourselves.

OT "love your neighbour as yourself"

"love the alien (I think I prefer "stranger" or maybe "those who are different from you") as yourself"

and expanded in the gospel – in this great summary of what it means to live out Jesus' teaching in practical terms
"I was a stranger and you welcomed me"

This is God's church, and he calls us to model his welcome to those who come.
Or to put it another way
God asks us to be a people of welcome

A few quick thoughts about welcoming, and then about belonging, and finally about inviting.

So, welcoming

Aware this is very difficult. No-one wants to be unwelcoming – but sadly sometimes it just happens.
I've been a member of a church like St Wimple's, that thought it was welcoming, but wasn't. And to be honest, I've been Mrs Jemima Fotheringay, or someone like her. Unconsciously, of course, but I've been judgmental and territorial.
I've also been a newcomer at churches like St Wimple's, that think they are good at welcoming, but aren't.

So, what do we do?

Firstly – we need to listen.

Feedback is really important.

One way to do this is simply to sit down and have a good think
"If I was coming to this church for the first time, what would it be like?"
Put yourself in another's shoes if you like. Perhaps some of the ideas in the story have given us food for thought...
But when we have been part of a church community, a church family, for a long time, it's very, very difficult to see what it's like for someone new.

So, even better than doing it ourself, is to ask someone who has recently started coming to church what their experience was.
Tip – if you are asked – be gentle, but be honest.

Another way is to visit other churches yourself and see what makes for a good welcome – or otherwise. Maybe when you're on holiday. Maybe the occasional Sunday when you're at home. God will be there every bit as much as God is here!

Having obtained feedback, then secondly, accept and act on it

For the key to making it happen is that we have to want to do better.

No church is perfect churches are made up of fallible human beings and we will constantly get things wrong as well as getting many things right. But we need to be open to listening, reflecting and changing if necessary.

Being creative in finding answers. Giving things a try –

I know of one church, for example, where they realised that their welcomers didn't have time to give out hymn books etc **and** help people with pushchairs, or help newcomers to find seats, or navigate round the service booklet.

So they split the role into two.

They re-created the traditional role of "sidesperson" to say "good morning" and give out the books; and made a new role for the welcomers, which consisted of making sure that newcomers and those with additional needs were fully taken care of.

Now entry into the building is smooth and speedy, and newcomers and people who need more time are helped too.

But, of course, there is much more to welcome than just facilitating a friendly arrival.

Welcoming continues after the service. How easy is it to slip into the habit of catching up with friends, or conducting some important church business after worship? Where does that leave the person who is "new"? Hands up; I have been very guilty of this in my tie.

If it is God's welcome we are offering then maybe we need to consider whether our first priority should be to make sure that the person we don't know is being cared for, engaged with – and recognised as being a loved and valued child of God.

[refused post-service coffee]

So, the second point – belonging.

Even having been made welcome, there is still a massive gap between feeling welcomed and feeling you belong - feeling like you have a place within the community. Being accepted.

And I think there are two strands to this

Firstly it's about building relationships

It's about us being willing to extend the size of our friendship groups and draw someone in. It's about genuinely taking an interest, about wanting them to be a member of the community.

And it's also about beginning to recognise a person's gifts and how God wants them to be used to build up his church. Does the person have a gift for reading aloud? For

visiting? For music? For hospitality? For youth ministry? It's about helping the person to find their unique space in the church family.

And it's at this point that it starts to become a real challenge for those of us who already belong, because

"every time someone new joins a church, that church changes"

repeat

"every time someone new joins a church, that church changes"

And this has to be true. Otherwise the new person is just an attendee and not a valued member of the church community.

A bit like someone coming to your house and being asked to sit in the hallway with a cup of tea whilst everyone else is enjoying a three course dinner in the dining room. It's not really belonging, is it?

And tied up with both welcoming and belonging is the idea of invitation – of inviting people to come, to make new friends, to get involved. Of sharing God's invitation with others

Now, I suspect that many of us feel uncomfortable about inviting people to anything to do with church.

And yet – don't we all love an invitation? It shows that we have been thought about. That someone cares. That someone would value our company, our presence, our contribution.

And don't we especially love a personal invitation? One that says "I enjoy this, I'm going, and I'd love it if you came with me."

To make it easier, we are starting to produce printed invitations for activities like Tuesday café - please use them (we have 500!!).

So take some invitations.

Make some invitations.

People may say no, and that's fine. But let them make the decision. Don't say their no for them!

[Examples of effective invitations]

This is massively challenging stuff.

It moves the focus of our church life away from those of us who already belong, to those who don't.

For those of us who regard church as a place of stability in an ever changing world, then it is a real challenge to move out of that comfort zone.

But if we are serious about offering God's invitation, God's welcome to those who are searching for meaning and relationship, then it is a challenge we have to pick up.

We will be thinking about this in the Lent Groups this week – please consider this as your invitation to join, and to share your thoughts....

Prayer to finish

Lord Jesus Christ, whose arms were opened wide upon the cross to welcome all, we pray that our church community may be open and welcoming to everyone.

Please help us to welcome those who are different from us, as well as those with whom we have things in common

Please help us to welcome those who make us feel awkward, as well as those with whom we feel comfortable;

Please help us to involve and talk to those we don't know, as well as those we do;

Please help us to be willing to make changes to the ways we have done things, if that will help others to belong;

Remembering all that you gave up to bring us back to you.

May your kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.