

Mark 6 of being a Healthy Church: Makes Room for all.

Perhaps I look at our church with rose-tinted glasses. I am just always so delighted to see everyone here at worship. I am sure that is a good thing and I suspect something that I could not hide from you if it were not the case. I have to say that it has not always been the case in every church that I have been associated with in some form or another. It is not also the case with all of the clergy that I know. It is a sad reality that it only takes a small number of critical voices to undermine ministry and dent confidence. Somebody once said to me, "Oh you clergy take it all too seriously!" as if it were all some kind of game. The reality is that for all Christians we should take it all seriously. That does not mean that we approach our faith in a sombre manner, Jesus said that he came to bring life in its fullness and there are occasions in the Gospels where he is recorded as being deliberately humorous. But we do believe that what we do is incredibly important. For inviting people to be part of God's kingdom is the most important thing there is, both for this life and for our eternal salvation. If we believe that, which I do, then nothing is more important. This would explain why I was so upset on Wednesday. I went into the dry cleaners, where they have their excellent book recycling scheme. There was one of our Youth Bibles that we give to all of our leavers from the Junior School. When I opened it we gave it to one of the girls who were leaving in the summer of 2005. How upsetting is that! Something given to help throughout the rest of her life just rejected. Even if she did not want it now, you would think her parents would want her to value it for later in her life. You see, I look at the whole world with rose-tinted glasses. But I always look at possibilities, at potential. That is why our church should be open to all and to make room for all. But of course this is not just my task; it is your task as well. I am not the church. This building is not the church. You are the church. Yes my openness in actions and policies make a big difference, but if I was not working in partnership with you, it would not work. I look forward to seeing you all as I now believe we all accept these realities – yes you see I do wear rose tinted glasses.

The Old Testament reading from Genesis gives us an appropriate reminder of our starting point. God has made a covenant with the people. The rainbow is a visual symbol of that covenant which is made with all life on earth, all people. That is very important, all people. Not just those people who at a particular time in their lives believe in God and try to live as he desires. No one is outside that covenant, whether they choose to accept it or not. One of the great differences of the Anglican Church in England with other denominations is that we view our parishes and our people in that way. We do not have a closed membership. We are not a secret society. People do not understand that, as the church operates differently from all other organisations. So it should, it has a unique function, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. So everyone in the parish is a parishioner, whether they come to church at this time or not, whether they believe in God at this time or not. The point is the church exists for everyone. I am sure, unless you are very unusual, that there have been times in your life when you have not been involved with church. That is the reality for most people and is increasingly the case. For someone to be baptised as a baby and then to spend all of their lives as a regular church goer is rare. You may be the exception, but if that is true there will have been times when you have been less enthusiastic, less committed. That is human nature. But the church has always been there, available. That is why the church in England over the centuries funded buildings in every community. It is a costly legacy. But it is a statement of commitment to everyone.

Jesus, when he met people, always saw in them the potential. In the reading from Luke 18 this morning the people did not want him to waste time on the noisy blind beggar. Why was that? If he was a child of God, covered by the covenant, was he not of equal value to them? The P.C.C. will be discussing this tomorrow and they are asked to look at Matthew 8. 1-17. Here Jesus heals a man with leprosy and commends the faith of a Roman centurion. In these people he sees those covered by the covenant, children of God, people loved and cared for by God. An outcast because of disease and an authority figure from the occupying power. How inclusive in God's kingdom is that? If Jesus operated in that kind of way, a way which would have upset many people of his day, how can we, his church, his gathered people on earth, operate in any other way? Of course our door is open on Sundays, and left open. The invitation is always there to come in.

However, having come in, what kind of welcome do people find? My rose tinted spectacles tell me that they find a warm welcome, but I could be wrong. Maybe it could be warmer. All research says that it is very difficult for people to join churches. Over the years I have heard some very odd things said about this church. "Oh that is the posh people's church." "They do not like children in that church." "Everything is old fashioned and out of touch with the real world in that church." All of those things have been said to me over the years and I responded by saying they were patently untrue. But it does show us the constant battle we are involved in to change the perception of people, and some people you will never change. I think we do try hard these days to be open and welcoming. I think that has been true of people who have moved to the village, having been involved in church elsewhere. Some of those people have commented how easy it has been to become involved here. That is good. We are certainly not precious about who does what. Some churches do welcome newcomers, but within a narrow band. They want "people like us" and can freeze out anyone who looks, dresses or sounds different "from us". I recall a member of the clergy telling me that his small church prayed fervently for new people. God honoured that prayer and sent a group of new people over a six month period. However, they were very different people and those who had been at the church for years did not know how to cope with them. In Leyton we had a group of black teenage boys in the congregation. They came to church in street fashion. This upset a number of older members. Did it matter to God the way that they dressed? How would we respond if it happened here?

We invite people to stay for tea or coffee after the service. I am delighted that often some people stay as long at that as they do at the service. Do we always welcome newcomers if they stay? I have been to other churches incognito and seen for myself that regulars huddle with their friends and I have been ignored. If a new person has the courage to stay, if this happens to them, are they going to come again?

Robert Warren, in the Healthy Churches' Handbook notes that some churches invite newcomers to church activities, but only to be part of the audience. We want them to buy things at the bring and buy, to come to the quiz evening, but that is as far as it goes. In some churches it can take years to be asked to DO anything. I do not think anyone could accuse us of that. We are only too delighted to involve people in anything.

What we are talking about here is incorporating newcomers into the life of the church. This is quite costly for those who are already in the church. It means sitting lightly on some of the things that we do. There are churches where the same person has read the lessons at Christmas Midnight Communion for fifty years! It is clearly very important that we look at the gifts of the people that God has sent to us and make ways that their gifts can be used. This is not just newcomers. Perhaps we are really not very good at that at all. I hope that all of us will be considering our level of giving as we fill in our electoral roll applications. This church is going to run at a small loss for 2006. Our average level of giving in 2005 at under £6 per person per week is near the bottom of all of the Church of England Churches in the Brentwood Deanery. That cannot be right. But we also need to look at what else we can offer, apart from finance, to this church. We need to look at how we might use offers of people's gifts. If we had a system in place we could then easily accommodate the gifts of new people.

Perhaps the most costly thing we need to give to new people is ourselves. Jesus called his disciples friends. We are called to be friends with him and with each other. Quakers call themselves The Society of Friends. Would it not be wonderful if true friendship was the attribute that this church was known for? In a previous church I recall a very sad conversation with someone who had been going to church for over forty years. I was the only person who ever went to tea in her house and I asked myself. Over tea she said, "What is a friend Patrick? I do not really understand? People just gossip about you and want to know your business. I've never had a friend." A Pentecostal Church in South America undertook some research as to why some people who started coming to church only came for a few weeks and then stopped, whilst others become involved and stayed long-term. They came up with a simple principle about the importance of forming significant relationships with those who were already members. Of those newcomers who formed a significant relationship with six members of the church in the first six months, 98% stayed. For those who made no significant relationships, only 2% stayed. The percentage of those who stayed went up steadily for every one significant relationship made. This is the heart of welcome, opening our hearts and ourselves to others. We all know that we live in a world of increasing distrust and isolation. People look for community in all kinds of places. But surely the place to find it is with people who love the Lord Jesus and want to show that love to others.

Of course we operate in a world where Christian faith is not the norm. Many people now in their 20s and 30s, maybe more, will have grown up in a world where they have had very little contact with Christianity. I went to a Primary School in the 1960s where we had no Religious Education. My ex-teachers were appalled when I went to University to study religion. Our children are unusual in this village in receiving a religious education, even if some of them do not value it. But what of the adults? What of those who do not come to this church? What of those who do, but have little or no background? We offer Confirmation Classes and indeed we are looking for candidates now for the confirmation in October. Could that be you? But what of others? We had someone two years ago in his 30s who had been confirmed at age twelve but had then drifted away from church. He was brave enough to ask to come to the classes. Most people would not be so brave. I know some people are frightened to go to the Lent courses for fear of "looking silly". The same is true of the Bible reading group. That cannot be right. We need to take more seriously our own education in the

faith. Why are our library books hardly borrowed? A normal Sunday service is not the forum for enquirers and others to ask their questions. What is? What can we do?

We know that there are shortcomings with our building in relation to those who are disabled. There is no pot of gold out there to help us. We also know there are difficulties with accommodating children under the age of three. One of our positives is that we have groups for children aged from three upwards, so we can be very accommodating to families, though of course so much else happens in our modern world for children on Sundays. I was with some people who go the family service at Fryerning on Wednesday. We see mum and the baby. But dad takes the ten year old to swimming lessons. You might say he could choose another time, but if that is when the lessons are and when his friends go, it is putting huge pressure on a child. Of course we also have one service a month, as well as other special services, that are dedicated to children. These are well supported by our uniformed organisations, with whom we have good links. At the service this month we had a group of parents waiting outside the church for the children. How can we encourage them in? Initially when they are collecting the children. Maybe we can encourage them to come along to the services themselves.

Putting on my rose-tinted glasses, I feel that we have come a long way in being an open and welcoming church that tries to make room for all. Where our building causes us problems we have at least acknowledged them, even if we feel that we cannot fully address them. There are things we can still do, there always are and always will be. How can we continue to break down people's perception of the church? How can we grow in friendship and community amongst ourselves so that we can be open, warm and welcoming to others? Are we all brave enough to pray consistently to God that he send us new people? Jesus welcomed the outcasts from society into God's kingdom. God's covenant with Noah was with all people. Amen.

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