

Sunday 17th March

Leviticus 19:18, 33-34

Ephesians 3:14-19

Matthew 25:31-46

Welcome – a community of invitation

One of the images that is often used of the church – any local church – possibly St Johns, CTK or St James - is that of a family. The church family is a phrase that's often used.

And you can see why. It gives a great picture of us as the children of God, of being brothers and sisters, and it well illustrates the close ties that exist between church members. It demonstrates the mutual support and love and commitment that exist between church members, expressed in practical and prayerful ways.

But it also illustrates why churches can sometimes be such closed groups which can be hard to break into.

Think of a family.

When family memberships change it can be very difficult.

When a new baby comes on the scene. It turns life upside down. It's been a privilege to see my own children and their partners adjust to family life. The arrival of the first baby is the biggest shock. Complete change of priorities and responsibilities, sleepless nights, seismic lifestyle change. But the second child changes things again. Upsets routines, means that no one child has a monopoly of time and affection, bringing all kinds of challenges and decisions. It takes a while for adjustments to be made. Things cannot be the same as they were previously. And this affects everyone.

Change can also happen in a family when the children leave home. Empty nest syndrome. No more children to care for and look after on a daily basis, perhaps some purpose in life taken away. Time, energies with nothing to fill them or use them. Pressure and challenges on the marital relationship. A real stress time. But also a chance to grow and develop. But again, there will be changes. In roles, in expectations, in opportunities.

Bereavement brings further challenges. Sadness, grief, regrets, lost opportunities, emptiness. Again changes of purpose, roles as well as the loss.

Then all too common is divorce and the challenges of step families. Families breaking up and then trying to embrace step children and new partners into existing relationships and structures. Kate and I – as I think she shared a couple of weeks ago – brought together our two families; our children aged from 9 to 18 – and moulded them into one different and

larger family. This took a lot of time and effort; a lot of tears and compromise and plenty of mistakes; but also brought a lot of joy and love.

And perhaps those thoughts on family can help us understand why it can be very hard for someone to be made welcome and to be able join a church. Just like it's hard to join a family.

This week in our Lent course we are thinking about ensuring our churches have this culture of welcome and invitation.

We are in a situation where we know that as churches we have to grow. In the groups last week we looked at the attendance in our churches 3 years ago, now and also thought about how things might be in 3 years time. For all 3 churches in the Parish we could see numbers getting smaller unless we did something. And that's what this going for growth initiative is all about. Ensuring that the churches we hand on to those who come after us are alive and growing, healthy and serving God in and for our communities. That we don't just keep things going until there is nothing left to keep going, but that we look to grow and develop and face the future.

But if we want to grow, we will at some time need to welcome new people. So I want to think a little about that today.

It can be hard to think back to our first time at church, or even our first time at this church. But maybe you can think about a time when you have visited a church while on holiday or staying elsewhere.

Was it easy to find the building, know where to park the car, find the way in (was there easy access for less mobile people). Was someone there to say hello to you, to offer you the books, explain what was happening and perhaps show you to a seat? Was the building warm and comfortable?

Did the people around you make some kind of contact – did they talk to you, or even smile at you? Perish the thought – were you sitting in 'someone's seat'?

Was the worship easy to take part in. Were the books clear to follow? Was it easy to know what page you were on, whether you were expected to stand, sit or kneel, where the hymns were.

Did people include you when it came to sharing the peace? Was it clear as to whether there was a collection or not? If it was a communion, was it easy to see where to go to receive. Was there an option for receiving a blessing or for gluten free/ non alcoholic wine?

And afterwards if there was tea and coffee, did you know where to go, did someone get a coffee for you, did people take the time to talk to you, were you made to pay (this actually happened to us ...)

And those are just the things that matter for someone like you and me who is used to church. Try to imagine for a moment how daunting coming to a church service could be for someone who has never been before (or only been to attend a baptism or wedding). It's a really hard thing to do. As I have said before, I compare this to me going into a betting shop.

The things we do here and the way we do them is unique to us. In the three churches in this parish things are done differently. I suspect you don't feel quite as comfortable worshipping in the other two churches. Someone coming to join us has to learn about our foibles – just like when a new member (a step child for example) joins a family they have to understand what they are joining.

And if someone survives their first visit, how do we then help them to get involved and feel they belong. How do we embrace them into the family? These are the kinds of things we will talk about this week, but the important thing is that when someone new joins a church, the church changes in some way – just like when someone joins a family, the family changes. And the same happens of course when someone leaves.

If we want someone to belong, we have to include them in the life of the church. Look for their gifts and abilities. Could they read the Bible readings, could they lead the intercessions? (Kate has told me that it was when she was invited to take part in these ministries that she really felt she belonged to this church.) Have they got an aptitude for helping with childrens work? You get the picture. They may do things differently to the way we have done things in the past – but that could well be the way that God uses to move us on!

So a few thoughts on welcoming and embracing new people.

And the other thing I want to think about briefly today is invitation.

How do you feel when you receive an invitation? To a party, to a wedding, to go out for a meal with someone or go to a concert or play with someone?

Invitations make me feel wanted. They make me feel special. They make me feel good. Someone has taken the time to invite me to something. They must think I will enjoy it. They want me there.

Even those letters through the door (which I seem to get all too often) inviting me personally to look round the latest McCarthy and Stone development make me feel special (for a moment at least).

Now, let your imagination run riot for a few moments. Suppose you are a member of an amateur dramatic club, and that each year you put on a production in the local village hall, but that membership is declining. People have left, others have got too elderly to take an active part; sadly some have died.

It is getting harder to get the productions on stage. The actors are now having to make the scenery, design the publicity and even go behind the bar in the interval to serve the drinks. How can you survive as a group?

And then you think of some of your friends who have an interest in plays; someone else who you know is artistic and could design sets; another who has links with a company that prints flyers and tickets.

You would, I am sure, invite them to come along. Enthuse with them about how good the productions are, how many people come along to watch, how enjoyable it is being part of the team and what good people the rest of the club are.

And when they come along you would make sure that the rest of the group make them feel welcome and special; that they are included and made to feel important. If they wish, you would ensure they are given things they could do to make a valued contribution to the group.

Of course, some of your friends might say it wasn't for them; they have other things they do on Wednesday evenings; they haven't got the time or interest right now. But you wouldn't be embarrassed about having asked them.

Now translate that to the church.

Why are we so reticent about inviting people. Why do we say to ourselves "Oh they wouldn't be interested..", why do we say people's "No's" for them?

Research shows that 20 out of 100 people are open to knowing more about being a Christian, and that 5 out of 100 would be open to coming to church if they were invited. 5 out of 100 may not seem many, its 1 in 20. So if each of us here invited one friend each month, then each month on average one of those 20 people we invited would come to church. And then it would be up to us in the welcome and encouragement we gave them.

I have been very encouraged recently that we – as churches - have started inviting people to things like Messy Church and the Tuesday Café. That's brilliant and I hope it continues and becomes the norm. But there is still more we can do.

So – welcome and invitation. These two things go together.

I hope we can see that inviting someone is something we could all do. The worst that could happen is that they could say no.

But even if we can't invite, if we find that too hard and challenging, we can certainly make sure that newcomers and visitors are made welcome and feel they can belong. Make sure that we do all we can to embrace newcomers and be ready to change as they become members of our church family – a family that is always growing, developing and changing.

