

# LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

## SERMON: Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2017

**1<sup>st</sup> Lesson**            Matthew 9.35-10.8

**2<sup>nd</sup> Lesson**            Romans 5.1-8

### **Address**

As you go, proclaim the good news.

For a moment, think about the last time you invited someone out for a coffee or round for dinner? What words did you use? Was it just a simple 'coffee?' or did you mention catching up or wanting to spend time with them? How would you describe your relationship? Do they know you well or are they a recent acquaintance?

Okay, I guess you know what's coming, when was the last time you invited someone to church?

Firstly, let me apologise for asking the question. Asking someone to church is hard, we've tried before, we're tired of being rejected, and that's what the minister is for ...Do any of those echo the responses in your heads?

Just as being friendly to folk and inviting them to coffee is a natural part of life, inviting people to church is part of what it is to be a Christian. But coffee invitations are much more straightforward than church ones.

Way back when, you know when church was always full and there was something happening every day, going to church wasn't really a choice. It was expected, and there wasn't much else going on that wasn't linked to church so people went anyway.

That world no longer exists. We will not step into the future if we're always looking over our shoulders. We have an inheritance we honour and are grateful for, but our future has to be grounded in the present.

Back then you were just inviting someone to try something different, not something they have never experienced. Now we need to think about why we come, and what people with no experience of church may be looking for that we could share.

We need to think about why it is we value coming together in this place, what draws us here, and how we can find the words to share that with others.

We need to challenge our answers, and question whether they are something only church can provide.

For example, we could say we come to experience God – but what if someone says 'I experience God when I walk in the hills'?

We could say we come because of our friendships – but someone might reply 'I have plenty of friends'?

Experiencing God and friendships may be major reasons for us, but reflecting on them may challenge us to deepen those reasons.

We experience God when we gather together, which is possible in other places, but should this also be the place where we talk about our experiences of God together?

We have friends here, but shouldn't this be where we gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ – a much deeper and committed relationship than friendship?

Exploring why we come, and reflecting on how that could become the basis for us inviting others, will change what we do and the nature of our invitation.

I have the impression that invitations to church fall in to two major categories: bullying or boring. The boring is probably the one we mainly do, something like – ‘Would you like to come to church with me?’

No detail, no reason, just wanting them to turn up. Someone who is ready to come may say yes, but most can simply say ‘no’ and then carry on talking about the weather.

The bullying is the standard form of evangelism which interrupts someone’s day telling them there are inherently bad, but if they agree to a list of statements everything will be fine.

If that is how you understand faith, or life has beaten you, then you may agree. Many will just walk on by when they hear this declared. It does seem that this works for many of our brothers and sisters who gather in other places, and they appear to be thriving, but overall the Church still remains in decline. So, it isn’t a panacea.

Clinging on to certainty may be a way forward, but it is not a way I am capable or convinced of. For me the path of faith is much more winding, broad, with numerous branches, and full of surprises. What **we** must do is transform our ‘boring’ invitations into much more enticing ones.

We gather together to share our experiences of God with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We have affirmed the eight points of Progressive Christianity and seek to be a welcoming, accepting and inclusive community, as exemplified by our becoming registered for same-sex marriages.

We now need to own who we say we are, and explore how we can attract and invite folk to join us on this journey. Hence the reminder of the 8 points this morning.

We need to liberate ourselves from being burdened by the past, by money, and on jobs to be done, so that we can focus on being Church, on being disciples together on the journey of life as we follow Christ’s way.

We have a positive message to share, we have good news that offers acceptance and welcome, to anyone and everyone – we just need to find more ways to express it, live it, and offer it.

Let me close by sharing the words of John S Spong - “Christ and the Body of Christ” – speaking of the nature of God, Jesus, and what being a Christian means:

God is real for me, a mystical, undefinable presence that I can experience but never explain.

I experience God as the source of life in the act of living fully.

I experience God as the source of love in the act of loving wastefully.

I experience God as the Ground of Being in the act of having the courage to be.

Jesus is the revelation of this God for me, not because of miracle stories or excessive pre-modern claims, but because he is portrayed as one who is fully alive with the life of God, totally loving with the love of God, and as one who possesses the capacity to be all that he could be revealing the very Ground of Being that I call God.

I serve the God that I meet in Jesus, not by trying to convert others to my way of believing, but by seeking to transform the world so that every person might have that God-like capacity to live fully, to love wastefully and to be all that each person can be. **Amen**      *By John S Spong. From The Once and Future Jesus*