

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sermon Communion Service for Sunday 2nd July 2017

Readings: Psalm 89:1–4, 15–18; Matthew 10:40-42

Sermon

Did you feel welcome when you got here this morning?

I expect so, and I am pretty confident that whether you've been coming for years, weeks, or for the first time, you'll have received a friendly greeting, been shown where to go, and someone will have probably engaged you in conversation.

We all have a sense from what we've heard from new attenders and people who've come along for events, funerals, weddings, baptisms, that we do a pretty good job of making folk welcome when they join us.

We can be affirmed by this, and we'd never want that to change, but we should never rest on our laurels, and I'd like to suggest two trains of thought that might lead us to deepen our welcome.

The first comes in response to the talk we hosted for Penwortham churches on Monday night given by Jeff Marsh from the Foxton Centre. The centre is in the Avenham area of Preston. They run open youth clubs, a community café, and several homelessness projects. Jeff described a world beyond my direct experience, one I knew existed, but always thought it was what happened in Manchester or Liverpool, not just over the river.

Lives affected by relationship breakdowns, drug and alcohol dependency, abuse, violence, prostitution, mental illness, or benefit sanctions, which can cause people to fall through the cracks of what we are fortunate enough to call society.

We might glimpse this world with the occasional person wandering along Liverpool Road or when we go into town shopping, but this is reality for our fellow human beings in parts of Preston and the vocation of the staff and volunteers of the Foxton Centre as they come alongside them.

So, two initial questions for us to ponder. Firstly, how can we, as individuals and church, offer at least 'a cup of cold water' to support the work of God's Kingdom which is clearly going on, in and through the Foxton Centre?

And secondly, if I was surprised by how life is lived a mile or two away, how well do we know what life is like in Penwortham?

Towards an answer to the first I'm going to get some leaflets about the Foxton Centre and put them at the back and in the foyer, and we can keep them in mind as part of our fundraising – but should we consider a greater commitment of our time and resources?

And for the second, I know there are places on the internet we can look for such data but I've asked Suzanne Simpson, the Community Involvement Officer for Penwortham at South Ribble Borough Council if they have such information and if she'd be willing to talk to us about it.

So that was my first train of thought, welcome as it relates to social justice and engagement. How can we express our welcome through supporting others where they are, and by better understanding the community around us?

The second train of thought is, how can we extend the welcome we express within these walls beyond them?

I must confess that part of what I share here is coming from my frustration with the Missional Discipleship initiative from Synod which in a very long-winded way is challenging us to focus on living the way Jesus did. If you hadn't noticed I do bring that subject up most Sundays, and I'd rather the Synod just helped us create a structure so we can get on with it. My other frustration comes from the apparent emphasis on evangelism, church growth, and New Testament images to illustrate the activity.

At heart, I don't have a problem with evangelism as sharing the good news of God, with church growth as deepening our relationship with God, and the stories of Jesus' followers in the New Testament are inspirational. But in the context of the discussions so far about Missional Discipleship, it raises for me issues about whether the subconscious aim is for everyone to become conservative evangelicals and whether more pragmatic liberal paths will be affirmed.

The New Testament images of the birth of the early Church are inspirational with communities being formed, thousands being converted, and lives transformed to be devoted and faithful followers of Christ.

It just doesn't ring true to me when we try to apply them directly to where the Church is now. Then the Church was something new, liberating, and forged in the fire of persecution. Now we've had two thousand years of wielding political power, being a dividing line between individuals, in communities and between warring nations, countless charges of hypocrisy, and too often being seen as oppressive rather than liberating. To me the NT images seem to imply we just need to flick the right switch and renewal will come. When I reflect on the situation the Church finds itself in now I feel much more resonance with the OT themes of wilderness and exile, of learning what it truly means to be God's people, building community, searching for or longing to return to, the Promised Land.

This has led me to read and circulate a copy around our elders of 'Jesus' People – what the Church should do next'. Its written by Steven Croft, who was Bishop of Sheffield and led the Fresh Expressions initiative, and argues for the Church to be transformed in character through engaging with the Beatitudes and seek to engage with the world.

It also led me to start reading a book called Invitational Ministry by Laurene Beth Bowers from our sister church in the USA, the United Church of Christ. Here she begins noting a piece of research by Diana Butler Bass that churches that are experiencing renewal are engaged in prayer, hospitality and invitation. Invitation becomes her focus, and it could deepen our welcome beyond our walls by supporting us to invite those we know, and those we haven't met yet, to encounter our life together, and also potentially transform our life together.

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 you 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 also 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.

Laurene Beth Bowers contrasts this with conventional evangelism which can be seen as intrusive and primarily seeks a change in the person evangelised to, not the person evangelising.

The invitational approach seeks to change the individual **and** the community. The individual is encouraged to share who they are, rather than conform, so that both they, and the community, are changed. This becomes a cycle as individuals and the community are transformed in minor and major ways, through engaging with each other and the Gospel.

This approach seeks to identify someone's spiritual needs and express how they can be met within the fellowship. It also acknowledges that someone who experiences God in the beauty of nature will be discomfited and unfamiliar with the formality of corporate worship. It encourages us to place ourselves in the shoes of those who have never entered a church before and be empathetic.

It also accepts that a direct invitation to a worship service is not always the best approach, and that invites to more social events or small group activities are more likely to be accepted and lead to deepening relationships.

So, the questions I have for you to ponder in the coming days:

How can we express our welcome through supporting others where they are, and by better understanding the community around us?

How can we extend the welcome we express within these walls beyond them?

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

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. **Amen**