

The Power of an Invitation

Readings: John 1:40-42; John 4:39-43

Allow me to ask you a question this morning. How many people have been coming to this church for over 50 years? What about those who have been coming here less than a year?

How many people went to church when they were children?

Who here came to church later in life, as an adult, with little or no church background?

Did anyone just walk off the street one day?

This morning I want to simply share this fact. That people who have never been to this church, including some Christians - but far more non-Christians - find this place utterly terrifying. I don't think many of us truly appreciate how terrifying coming to this church is for a lot of people... or any church for that matter.

Now perhaps people from other churches may not find it so scary - especially the Anglicans who know what to expect more or less. But non-church goers would find coming here like us visiting the dentist perhaps or some other place we'd rather not. In fact coming to church on a Sunday morning would be so far from their conscience thoughts it wouldn't be funny.

So what I'm saying is that coming to church for the vast majority of people isn't simply something they don't think about doing, it is something that would terrify them if they did think about it.

Now we know that people here in this congregation aren't terrifying. No one here is going to jump down anyone's throat and embarrass visitors if they happened to enter the building. No one here wants anyone to feel uncomfortable or nervous. But people out there don't know this. They have little idea what is going to happen. Their imagination goes wild. There could any kind of religious loonies here ready to pounce. The actual thought of encountering God in a life-changing perhaps never ever enters their mind, because of everything else going on - the people, the music, the building...

The things we take for granted in a church service can be for some people incredibly unsettling. Be it the standing or kneeling or the singing - passing the peace - yikes! Perhaps the greatest fear is going up for Communion. The sense that everyone is looking at them. The uncertainty of doing the right things. Being judged, condemned either - which is crazy!

Perhaps the greatest delusion we have as a church is thinking that the right programs or the right building or even the right preacher will create church growth; that it will entice *new* people to come along. (Not the church hoppers who tend do the rounds over the decades.) These things won't really create church growth. Statistics overwhelmingly prove that over 80% of *new* church goers start coming to church because of one thing and one thing only. And yet for many church goers themselves the very thought of this is either terrifying or even unthinkable - even though it is so easy to do. Even though the statistics prove how successful this is. Many Church goers rarely do this - perhaps a few times ever... once in a while. It may in some ways be directly connected with why we don't see non church goers in our church. What am I talking about...?

[VIDEO] www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzrP1DNd0L0

Personally inviting people is by far the greatest most successful way of getting people to church. But when was the last time you invited someone to church? Does inviting someone come easy to us? Why is it so hard for us to invite people?

It is because people just aren't keen? But what do they truly know about church when they don't go? Or are they right not to be keen - cos church is so unremarkable... boring? If church is, what does it say about us, our faith?

Is it because it's just not their thing? But isn't the Good News for everyone? Or are their lives better without knowing the Good News? If it is, what does it say about the Good News we express - either intentionally or not?

Perhaps there are much more important questions we need to ask ourselves first. Questions much closer to home. But these questions aren't to attack you. Rather I hope these questions will help us all see something imperative, crucial.

How excited are we about coming to church ourselves? Is there a real anticipation as Sunday approaches or is it simply the thing we do? Like the grocery shop on Thursday or the Wednesday walking group... What aspects of church really make you dance inside; almost burst with anticipation? Is it the music, the preaching, the people, the prayers...? All of it? None of it? What would you really miss by not coming?

The video we just saw talked about the something great going on at his church. Is there something great going on here that you are bursting to tell others to come and see for themselves? Do we expect others to experience God in some way by being here - do we? The video talked about people's lives being transformed by God's love. Are people's lives being transformed by God's love? Is your life continually being transformed by God?

I'm not talking about warm fuzzy feelings or good the events we do. I'm taking about people's lives being TRANSFORMED. Anyone - from someone who has been coming here for fifty years - their life can be transformed just as much as a first time visitor. Are people's lives changed for the better or do we simply plod along - week after week, set in our ways? Are our lives drawing closer to God... the incredible reality of a body of Christ's followers meeting together to worship this incredible God...?

The question we need to ask ourselves is what is church for us? Or more importantly, what has church become?

Now we all know that going to church isn't the goal in itself. Encountering Jesus Christ in a living and life-changing way is what faith is really about. And we know that this life-changing experience isn't just when we first commit ourselves to Christ. This life-changing faith continues for all people throughout their life, throughout our lives, each and every day is an opportunity to be amazed by God, touched by God, challenged by God, changed by God. These promises are for long time church goers as well as first time visitors. And this touch by God isn't simply for the individual to "enjoy" internally but rather it is to help us continue the work of Christ in this world, to be used by God, to love God and to love others - to bring in the Kingdom of God. This is what an encounter with God is all about.

What awesome things are happening here? And again I'm not just talking about personal buzzes - be they the traditional satisfaction we get from a good liturgical service or the personal thrill we get from the modern songs perhaps. What things inspire us in our service to God, in our calling by God - in our continuing the work of Christ here in this world? Transforming the world and ourselves towards God? What happens here as we gather together that really fire us up - not in an emotional high, but a spiritual awakening one could say?

I don't know who told me, I'm pretty sure it wasn't myself - but it sounds good enough to come from me. The focus over the past several years has been on church growth. Looking at programmes, gimmicks, user friendly services, etc. All kinds of things to encourage church growth. Where perhaps our focus needs to be on church health not church growth. How healthy are we as a church?

I'm not talking about the finances. I'm not taking about all the church events people attend. But rather how healthy are we as a church - regardless of our numerical attendance or resources. How healthy are we in our praise and worship (and I'm not talking about just the singing)? How healthy are we in our response of who God is and what God has done for us. In our relationships with one another? In our priorities in life beyond these walls? Our faithfulness?

Are we all that God wants us to be for him or is God what we want God to be for us?

When we think about inviting people to church it may scare us, because we don't know what people may say. They may say no!! But in the video we see that the man continued to invite the lady regularly - in a positive friendly way. He was excited about his church, passionate about what was going on there. He wanted to share it, even going out of his way to encourage the lady even though he was rejected many times. He even let her listen to the music she liked.

So let me ask you and incredibly important question, for the leaders and faithful members alike. Because your answer will impact on the future of this church. Why is it so hard to invite people to this church and what is it saying about us that perhaps we don't want to see? And importantly - what do we need to do about it? Because as the philosopher said, if nothing changes - nothing will change!

(Pray about asking someone to church)

(Pray and think about what Church means to you)