

Introduction to Inclusive Church - Jan 7th 2023, St James

Luke 15:1-10

Gal 3:26 - 29

Lord for the years
Amazing Grace
what a friend I've found
An Army of ordinary people
There's a witness in God's mercy

Jesus attracted the attention of tax collectors and sinners much to the disgust of the Pharisees and scribes. In response, Jesus tells three parables in Luke 15 which reflect the overwhelming joy in finding that which was lost. In each case the joy was expressed in celebrating with friends and neighbours. Fellowship round the meal table is a sign of the kingdom.

The lost sheep (vv. 3-7) was sought until it was found. The ninety-nine were not left in safety but in the wilderness or desert. That is the measure of love for the lost: a willingness to risk everything, even life. The woman sought the lost coin until she found it, there was no giving up.

God is no less persistent than humans.

God takes the initiative for the restoration of wholeness.

When we read the text, we should recognise that **we** are the ones who are sought out and the ones who are welcomed.

The 'outsider' is important to Jesus. He is being hounded by the legal specialists of the religious establishment, the 'informed laity' of his day, namely the Pharisees and the scribes.

The tense of the word 'grumbling' indicates that these people kept sniping away at Jesus' habit of dining with sinners and tax collectors. Note the word 'all' in 15.1. Luke mentions these socially despised taxmen 10 times in his Gospel. Jesus' practice of keeping 'bad company' in the eyes of the righteous is an important tradition.

Who might be today's equivalent of those whom society regards as 'outsiders'

— a family seeking asylum,
someone who is homeless and sleeping on the streets,
a man with a different coloured skin,
a girl addicted to drugs,
a boy with HIV/AIDS?

Jesus treated no one as an 'outsider'.

Not only did Jesus tolerate these 'unacceptable' people — he actually welcomed their company and ate with them. The Pharisees strongly criticised him.

Could their attitude be compared with that of some people today?

Recently one church opened its doors, allowing part of the building to be used as a night shelter for the homeless. There were complaints from people both inside and outside the church. What about the potential for crime, untidy queuing in the street, the smell of cooking or dirty socks left in the church hall? Human beings are the ones who create 'outsiders'. No one is excluded from God's love.

So how do we do at St James? Would we tolerate outsiders? Do we tolerate them, welcome them?

During the next 6 months we're going on a journey to think about how welcoming we really are at St James and whether we want to be part of an organisation called Inclusive Church.

This is their statement:

"We believe in inclusive Church – a church which celebrates and affirms every person and does not discriminate. We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on the grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."

So there are reasons we might want to sign up:

People looking for a safe place, a welcoming place, would be able to find us - there is a map of Inclusive Churches

The more churches join the organisation the more the Institution will listen to the voice and take note of what the spirit is saying to the local churches.

And there are reasons we might not want to sign up:

It might harm our relationship with other churches - the chapel or others in the deanery.

We might feel its too political, too radical, makes too much noise, draws attention to ourselves

We might feel that not only can we personally not agree, but we're not ok with being in a church where some people do agree

Lets be honest, there are dangers ahead

I recognise that even talking about these things makes some people nervous of conflict, defensive of their positions and opinions. Afraid. It risks dividing us, upsetting us, and challenging our long held beliefs.

So why would I lead us there?

One is timing. There are current debates and legislation in the Church of England about legalising blessings and services for gay couple. I feel we should be prepared and informed at the very least as to why we stand where we do on these things.

Another is that talking about these things in a reasonable way actually makes them less scary, understanding and love beat fear every time. What's scary in the dark, is not scary when the light goes on.

Also - we actually disagree about lots of pretty important things already - Brexit, politics, climate change, other faiths - and yet we're happy to worship here, sitting next to those people in the pew. Why would these issues prove the breaking point for British reserve, tolerance and decency!

Finally I think that there is a risk that the church is making itself irrelevant. Not because of where it stands on these issues, but because it cannot explain them to the rest of the world. Look we're in the church, we believe that God became human, and died on a cross for us - most of our neighbours know we think that, and accept it. We can probably explain our belief to them or to ourselves. But when it comes to sexuality, we seem to be unable of giving a reasonable explanation for the place we come from.

So the next 6 months are about listening to all sides, thinking and reflecting on why we think and believe what we do. Its going to be a slow journey. If you want to travel fast go alone, if you travel far, go in a group. We want to go together, as St James.

Now - we're going to look at several different issues around inclusivity - this is not just sexuality -
Ethnicity / race
disability
Wealth and poverty
Gender
Mental health

Some things will be quite practical - if you're visually impaired - you can see some stuff, you're not blind, but just find it difficult. Then how are we including or welcoming you if our service sheets are all tiny, or you can't see where the steps are.

Some things will ask us to be imaginative and reflect - if I was homeless, or just on the breadline - how would I feel coming here, looking round? What can we do to change those things?

What would it be like if I was black, or had mental health troubles.

Some things will be cultural - or the way we've always seen the world - and we might find we need to justify why we think about things the way we do.

Some things will be about theology and belief.

Why does the church think something is necessarily so, even HOW does the church come to conclusions.

I want to try to present a balance - my aim is that we become more informed, more aware of why we make the choices we do, and able to speak about the places we come from.

My aim is not that we all have to agree on everything. That would be delusional!

But we might be able to say that we can tolerate our differences, that we can go along with things. If it helps, my last church where we did this process, and at the end we did a blind vote, and came out in favour of joining Inclusive church, there were still some who disagreed with the majority, but they were able to stay and worship God with us, and see us as brothers and sisters in the same heavenly family.

My prayer is that the same will happen here.

And if you have suggestions, comments, or just want to share whatever you're feeling, then please let me know. If these discussions mean I get to go round everyone's house and have a good chat, then that would be a brilliant outcome. Don't keep it in, lets talk about it, with each other and even the vicar!

Next week we're looking at disability.