

## **We are a friendly church**

Yesterday, I drove past a church with a faded poster from the 1980s, with a cartoon smile on the front, saying 'we are a friendly church'! Most churches would regard themselves as friendly. It is quite difficult to imagine being part of a church that does not. So when a church is asked about its particular strengths, most churches will of course, say 'we are friendly and welcoming.' And Bloomsbury is no exception. We do regard ourselves as just that. But as with individuals, so with communities, the way to establish whether we really are a friendly church, is not to decide for ourselves because we like to be perceived as friendly people.

It is rather to find out from those who are not necessarily in the mainstream of the church's life. Our young people's group, Xchange, has done precisely that this week. We are working our way through a course called the Micah Challenge, in which we are encouraged to integrate our worshipping life with a call to justice. In this group, there are people from various backgrounds. Students from a broad cultural and social spectrum, young adults from around the world who work in the city, Moslems who are keen to find out what Christianity is. And this week, this diverse bunch of people were asked about the strengths of the church here at Bloomsbury.

And the most popular strength that appeared on the little green sheets we drew up, were that we are friendly and welcoming. It seems to me that this means either one of two things: On the one hand, we couldn't actually think of any strengths so we went for the easiest option. On the other, that we are self delusional about who we are. Or on some third hand, that we actually are a friendly and welcoming church! And we can give ourselves a jolly good pat on the back!

Probably the strongest story came from one of our Muslim members, who struggled through the constraints of his language and his own emotion, to express his gratitude to us for the way that he had been welcomed, trusted and helped by the church. It seemed to me, one of those moments, when – from an entirely unexpected source, and for unexpected reasons, you seem to have a ground-shaking experience of divine encouragement.

Some of the comments that were recorded, were that people not only recognise you when you visit here for a second time – a feat in itself in a relatively large church – but they remember your name and a little bit about you. Whilst more than half of the group found the church on the internet, most came back because of the welcome they had received.

Still, we run the danger this morning of giving ourselves a jolly good pat on the back. And if you're a visitor to Bloomsbury, then you probably will have a more realistic view of us than we have of ourselves – and if we are deluded, then I hope you feel equipped to speak the truth to us in love! But of course, having said all this about being a welcoming church – it does not mean that we always get it right – it does not mean that everybody feels welcomed and at home – it does not mean that we have mastered this gift, and can focus on something else.

## **Gospel**

The Gospel reading this morning speaks of the invitation and welcome into the Kingdom that Jesus offers. He offers a welcome to the wrong people. To the sinners and tax collectors. To those who were excluded from the people of God because of their health, or status, or

behaviour. We also have the story of the woman who touched the cloak of Jesus, a haemorrhaging woman – who would have been excluded and unclean. And when she touches Jesus, it should have made him unclean. But something happened that meant it never occurred to any of his enemies to accuse him of that: she is healed. Jesus himself knew how to offer a welcome, and the picture that you have is that wherever he goes, people who had felt belittled, condemned or excluded – are throwing their hats in the air!

And this annoys people, and they ask what Jesus is playing at. Jesus responds by referring his critics to Hosea, to the reading that we had from the Old Testament. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Love for God means loving other people – the covenant with God means a commitment to justice – to welcome God, means to welcome all! But the welcome offered by Jesus goes beyond the politeness that can so easily shape what we understand by welcome.

Jesus is criticised because he not only welcomes these outsiders, but that he eats with them – they touch him, he heals them, and rejoices that they sit at his table. The great banquet scenes of the Kingdom of God were pictured by many in Jesus day as a black tie dinner, in which the great and the good get their just reward. The picture painted by Jesus, is that the great banquet of the Kingdom of God, is one where hungry people sit around a table with lots of good food.

### **Loneliness**

I wonder who are the hungry on our doorstep? One of the exercises we were encouraged to do at Xchange, was to identify the needs of people on the doorstep. And one of the major underlying problems to be addressed and discussed was that of loneliness. And not only loneliness, but fear of loneliness. On Thursday I met up with a friend from college who works just around the corner from here – who said that London is full of lonely people. This is a young professional, whose entire social network is young professionals, with busy social lives. Who nevertheless, are so largely characterised by loneliness, and fear of loneliness. But it is not only young professionals who are lonely, or constitute ‘the hungry’ on our doorstep.

This week, we hosted the funeral of Alan Bayston. Strictly speaking, Alan was not homeless – but he did live on the streets, and was known to many people of the homeless communities here. We didn’t know a huge amount about Alan, although he had been coming to the church here for many years. He kept himself to himself, didn’t give much away, was quiet and unassuming. And yet, at his funeral here, there were almost forty people – a quarter of whom actually spoke out to say something about him. I think there were eight Bloomsbury people here in total. But it was a remarkable event.

And listening to one of Alan’s friends talk about that event from the perspective of a homeless person was quite humbling. To have seen a person whose status would render him an outsider or reject to many in our society, to see this person treated with dignity, his life genuinely celebrated and his death genuinely mourned, was an enormously powerful experience for this visitor the church. Now I’m not so much praising the church here, as this was a much wider communal event – but this event seemed to reflect quite faithfully the events described in that Gospel reading from this morning – where Jesus rejoices in the people that society seems to have neglected, rejected or marginalised.

It is an example, but it leaves us with the question of what it means to be a welcoming community in a London which, as my friend put it, is crowded with lonely people!

## Challenge

The temptation would be to rush into a method. Okay – talk to someone you don't know, find out something about them, and remember it for next week ... then they'll be impressed and feel welcomed. Well, that's all very nice. But if that's the level at which we engage with people, I think Jesus might well say to us, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'. In other words – that you genuinely care for people, rather than ticking the right methodological boxes that guarantee success. I desire love, not effectiveness. *I desire mercy not sacrifice.*

Those words from Hosea are uttered to a people who believed they were doing all the right things, but had lost touch with God himself. Sure, the worship being conducted in Israel was good, sound worship. But it was disconnected from the realities of daily life, separated from the reality of human need. And it is into this that Hosea utters God's *judgement, I desire mercy not sacrifice.*

And having spelt out many of the things we do well, it may be worth reminding ourselves of the challenge issued to us. That we can think we are doing the right things – that we can confuse welcome with our own cultural habits of politeness and social behaviour. That we can think we have been welcoming because we have hosted a funeral, shaken someone's hand, offered a smile. And valuable though those things are, we can still not welcome people at the deepest level. Our call is meet real human need – to show mercy – rather than ticking the boxes of so-called ~Christian behaviour – sacrifice. *I desire mercy not sacrifice.*

At Xchange, the young people almost universally noted how easy our whole lives are shaped by trivia. Our friendships, by trivial conversations that barely scratch the surface. Because of busyness, or fear of exposing ourselves, because of a reluctance to be vulnerable, our friendships with brothers and sisters in Christ can all-too-easily remain trivial. And that is what leaves us and others feeling lonely. And Jesus invites us to explore what Hosea meant, when he says *I desire mercy not sacrifice.*

I wonder how many of us find ourselves in a position like that of Jesus – where we can feel that power has gone out from us, because someone in dire need has touched us. Listen to Westminster city council's strategy for homeless people. It's strategy for providing a good welcome to London, for security and safety for visitors. The last thing anyone wants is for power to flow from them as it did from Jesus, because it should contaminate them.

But Jesus is not contaminated by this unfortunate woman. His resources of life cascade like a waterfall into her life, healing and restoring. The story is hemmed in by a wider story of resurrection – the implication being that when people are restored in this way – that is the heart of resurrection. The challenge to us is to be in a position where we are as vulnerable as was Jesus. Where – defying the demand for safety and security – we can be touched by others.

That is when we perceive divine power flowing from us!

That is when we offer genuine welcome at the deepest level.

That is when we discover the true meaning of these words: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'