

Making Welcome

James 2.1-10

Going to a church for the first time can be very daunting, even if you are a regular churchgoer. We had the usual problems going to Mass at RC churches in Austria, where we regularly used to holiday each summer. Everyone knows the service, so there aren't enough books to go round. So you go early to make sure you've got those. It takes quite a while to find the place in a very thick book, but you think you've got that right. And then when it comes to the Creed, they sneakily change it from the Nicene Creed to the Apostles Creed, which is on a different page (and with no note to tell you where it is). Despite any real knowledge of German, we cope – but it made me glad that at least with having an order or service which we follow pretty well straight, we shouldn't get too many people lost here.

But it's not just being able to join in – it is whether you feel welcome. Let me read some extracts from an article by David Self that once appeared in the Church Times 'Away from home for the weekend, I attended a church I'd never visited before. At the end of the parish communion, I handed in my hymn and service books and hovered near the coffee table. A lady approached me. "I'm afraid coffee's only for regulars, dear," she said.....He went on: 'Circumstances have meant that, during the course of the summer, I've been to services in a number of different parishes. One thing has struck me repeatedly: a considerable proportion of them do not expect newcomers.... Jean wants names for this, Joan wants helpers for that. It is assumed we all know Jean and Joan. Then there are a couple of in-jokes. Even an individual or a family on a third or fourth visit is left feeling that this is as much a private club as a branch of a worldwide Church..... It is tempting to draw an analogy with Marks & Spencer. Everyone once felt the need to slip into either M&S or the C of E for life's essentials: socks, baptism, knickers, marriage. At Christmas, both were essential stopping-off points. But gradually, it seemed possible to rely on other outlets.' That was his experience. And I have certainly had people tell me they have been to a church on holiday, and been asked to move because they have sat in 'Mrs So-and-so's seat'. Individual branches of the Church of England thrive because they offer an exotic high mass or a tub-thumping sermon. But if the brand at large is to attract a wider clientele, its national management must ensure that all branches not only learn the art of window-dressing but also make casual customers (even ones without a Clubcard) feel that this is their sort of place.'

Well, all that is not so far from what we heard in the New Testament reading from James, was it? One of the problems in that community was people being snobbish – and treating people who came to their services differently according to their status. 'How dreadful,' we say – but a copy of the list of 'seatings' as they were called for my last parish was found not that long ago. Where you sat was defined by your social standing, or your contribution. It was officially ended in the c.19th, but Chobham

apparently didn't take much notice of that for a long time. It wasn't unique in that! Maybe someone can fill me in on when 'seatings' ended in Ludlow. One of my daughters was telling me that their Vicar took his congregation to task because he is currently mentoring a theological student. This young lady had been to the church for two weeks, but the only people who had spoken to her were the two or three she already knew. In villages that is unlikely to happen – but in town and city churches all too common.

We can do some things which are 'institutional' – like having clear orders of service, and enough books. We can try to make sure the building is warm and well lit. But the real feeling of being welcome comes from *people*. It needs all of us to be consciously welcoming. If we are in a church which has hymn books and service books and we see someone struggling to find the place in the hymn book, it is swapping ours for theirs open at the right place. It is smiling rather than frowning when their child drops something noisily on the floor. In my last parish we had one man who was particularly good at making parents with small children feel unwelcome. The Churchwardens had a system for heading him off as he approached them to moan about their children's behaviour!

Being welcoming is reflecting the message of the Gospel. Jesus welcomed people of all sorts. We heard in today's Gospel about his encounter with a Gentile woman in Tyre, and how he healed her daughter. The Christian faith is inclusive, not exclusive, if it follows the lead of Jesus. It welcomes those who are not welcomed by others. It rejoices to have amongst its members those who are sidelined by society for whatever reason. It meets people where they are, not where we would like them to be.

Think what happens when someone comes to church, for the first time, or for the first time after a long gap. For some it will be an opportunity to see that the church isn't what their preconceptions lead them to think. Quite possibly the last time they were in church on a Sunday was forty years ago, and things have changed a lot since then. For others it may be a return to something that they have drifted away from, without any particular reason. Most of us are lazy, if we are honest enough to admit it, and we can get out of good habits just as easily as we can get into bad ones. Making them welcome is what we can offer. What happens thereafter is between them and God. We can maybe help – but it is enabling them to make a single step in the long journey of faith that we are all involved in.

Let me end with a piece called 'The Model Church' in that remarkable book of c.19th revivalist hymns 'Sacred Songs and Solos'. It begins

Well, wife, I've found the model church, and worshipped there today;
It made me think of good old times, before my hair was grey;
The meeting house was finer built than they were years ago;
But then I found, when I went in, it was not built for show.
The sexton did not set me down away back by the door;
he knew that I was old and deaf, and saw that I was poor;
he must have been Christian man - he led me boldly through
The crowded aisle of that grand church, to find a pleasant pew.

We worship a welcoming Lord, and offer his welcome to any who will accept it.