

Trinity 4, Year C, Proper 10

St James, Dursley 10am

10th July 2022

Might have told you this story before! Apologies. What happens after 8 years in post!

When I was at theological college in Chichester I visited a church where the father-in-law of a friend of ours was the parish priest.

I clearly remember that first visit to an evening Eucharist at St Patrick's in Hove. The church is enormous – bigger than St James. It had been reordered so that an altar was placed almost centrally in the nave and the congregation sat around it in an oval shape. Some pews had been pushed right back against the walls and, as it was evening, they were almost in darkness and I hadn't realised that some people were sitting there during the service.

As the time came for the sharing of the peace, I was prepared for the way they did it in St Patrick's, because we'd adopted the same practice at some summer camps that we'd attended, joining a number of parishes together for a week in the summer. We shared 'the kiss of peace' – not just a polite shake of the hand, but a kiss on both cheeks. That was OK – I was 'a new man' so I was OK about greeting other men in that way. I knew many of the congregation from the summer camps anyway and those I didn't know would be used to the kissing business, so that would be OK too.

What I hadn't bargained for, was that the people who had gathered for the Eucharist and sat themselves in the shadows of the church, had actually arrived to spend the night in the church's shelter for the homeless. They were all men – men who spent their days either on the streets or in day centres. Everything they owned they were either wearing or they carried

with them. And clearly some of them had had access to alcohol. Yet when it came to sharing the kiss of peace, they were all there, ready and waiting!

‘And who is my neighbour?’ the lawyer asked Jesus.

Most of the original hearers of the parable in today’s Gospel would have found the story of a Samaritan coming to the aid of a Jewish traveller, unbelievable. Prejudice against the Samaritans was such that they were just not considered to be the sort of people who would do such a thing. And yet in this, arguably the most well-known of Jesus’ parables, it is the outsider who saves the day – it is, in effect, the outsider who becomes the saviour. The Samaritan is, unexpectedly, the blessing for the poor man mugged on the road to Jericho.

Notice though how Jesus actually answered a slightly different question to the one the lawyer posed. The man had asked, ‘who is my neighbour?’ After telling his parable, Jesus asked, ‘who *was* a neighbour to the man?’ To the victim of the mugging, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan all qualified to be his ‘neighbour’, however only the Samaritan was truly a neighbour to him.

I think that for us this parable poses some questions about who our neighbours are and how far we are prepared to go to BE a neighbour; to be a blessing to others. But I think the parable also takes us, this Christian community, into the whole question of how we *welcome* those who are our neighbours.

I’ve seen quite a lot of Bishop Rachel, the Bishop of Gloucester, recently.

Just last Wednesday in St Giles for their wonderful service of celebration for the work that’s been carried out there – ‘Access for all’ project is all about how people are welcomed and enabled to access the building.

A couple of weeks ago Bishop Rachel was here at St James. She spent a day in the Wotton Deanery which began here with the Deanery clergy for Morning Prayer and then coffee and pastries.

Bishop Rachel is always early. Knowing this I was there before her. Saw her arrive. She paused to photograph the notice board outside advertising the various upcoming events and then the notice board in the porch. She said to me; ‘the thing I like about this church is the strong sense of welcome before you even enter the building. Very complimentary! Bonus points for Dursley.

But – there’s always a but – I had to reflect – privately, not to the bishop - does that sense of welcome follow through to those who worship with us? To those who come with the possibility of joining and of belonging with us?

When we look around this morning, how representative are we of the local community – of our neighbours? Where is the spread of ages of those who live in Dursley? Where are the families? Where are the little children? Where are the teens, the 20’s, the 30’s, the 40’s and dare I say even the 50’s? Are there people in our church family from every part of Dursley? From every different area of our town? Every different estate? How inclusive are we? How truly willing are we all to welcome those who, if they came to a service, would probably be a bit different to us? Maybe not behave in the way we might expect them to. Whether that’s because they’re children who like to express themselves and probably can’t follow every part of the service, or whether they’re people who come for the first time and have no experience of church; of what happens here on a Sunday and why.

So do we need to ask ourselves again, ‘who are our neighbours’ and also ‘how are we being neighbours to them’? Do we perhaps need to be thinking about how we can all be even more

welcoming, more open, more inclusive? More invitational; more confident about inviting people to come to our services?

A lot for us to ponder on. The PCC has recently discussed some of the things I spoke about at the Annual meeting in May and we are determined to take action on re-starting Messy Church so that we can hopefully re-connect with some families locally. We're also working on re-introducing a monthly informal service; something that perhaps parents with smaller children could feel comfortable joining even if their toddler sometimes expresses themselves a little noisily. Maybe these connections might lead us to be in the wonderful position of needing to reintroduce Junior Church on the other Sundays in the month. Perhaps, if we work with Dursley Primary Academy, we might connect with some of the children through their love of singing and even, in the fullness of time, see some children in the choir and their parents in the congregation.

It's not just about families and children, although they are a big chunk of our neighbours who we're missing and, as people often say, 'they are our future'. What I don't want you to go away thinking is that Michael doesn't think we're welcoming because that's clearly not true. Just reflect on this weekend; another book stall which connects with the breadth of our community and, when it's in the church because of the weather, brings people into the building, perhaps for the first time, and offers them hospitality and welcome. The 'Count on Nature' event and the time spent with children from Dursley Academy on Friday as they explored the churchyard. Or the monthly Coffee, Cake and Music mornings which draw a different mix of people into the church where they find a very warm welcome, lots of lovely cake and beautiful music. And, most recently, Arts Week which was another very successful outreach which welcomed many people into the building, some for the first time; making that first step over the threshold.

There is much that we are doing really well and it is important that we hear that. This gives us much to build on, to take forward and perhaps develop further. How can we draw some of those people in and encourage them 'to stick' with us?

All of us can play our part in this. St Paul in his letter to the Colossians reminded the people that they were being prayed for. Prayer is vital and we can begin by praying that we might connect with new people and that they will find us welcoming and want to stay and explore the faith with us. We can all pray that these new attempts to connect and re-connect will be fruitful. I hope that many of you will also feel called to be actively involved, offering your own gifts and time so that when the plea goes out for help, there will be positive volunteers as a response.

I was also struck by the words of our first reading which spoke about God making us abundantly prosperous in all our undertakings. That's a good thing to pray for and for us all to believe that God, who is faithful, will bless all our endeavours.