
“Come with me to church on Sunday — *you’ll love it!*”

Sermon • Rev’d John Shoaf • 8 December 2024

Malachi 3:1-4 • Philippians 1:3-11 • Luke 3:1-6



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Paul’s letters always contain much truth. He was a great teacher about God and Christ and the Spirit, and reading his letters is always rewarding. Besides Christian doctrine, he also included a lot of personal messages about his relations with his brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of it is very touching, and we can relate to his feelings as he went about the work God had set him to.

In today’s reading from the letter to the Philippians, there is a passage which I feel I could address to all of you:

I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy because of the way in which you have helped me in

the work of the gospel from the very first day until now. And so I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Christ Jesus. You are always in my heart! And so it is only right for me to feel as I do about you. For you have all shared with me in this privilege that God has given me. (Phil 1:3-7a)

You and I do indeed share in the great privilege of serving God and God's people. It is good to reflect on this from time to time, on the work we do and the bond that we all have in doing that work.

And what work do we do? Why are we here? Very simply, we are here to share the Gospel as much as we can with as many people as we can. That is what God calls us to do. Our main instrument in sharing the Gospel is the Church. We come together here to learn about and to worship God, and we encourage others to join with us here; so it is important that we present ourselves and God's teaching in ways that will encourage others to join us. That is why we often talk about how we welcome people, how we greet them at the door, how we help them to get acquainted with us.

I think we do the welcome bit very well. I have heard from various newcomers that we are generally a friendly bunch. But just as important is that the services themselves are welcoming, and in line with this, I have a few thoughts:

- Anglican liturgy is formal and wordy, with a lot of call-and-response, and bits like the Gloria which most of us know, but which may be strange to newcomers
- The Anglican Prayer Book offers many choices to the service leader, and it can be confusing for a newcomer to follow
- Our liturgy is not very child-friendly, expressing many complex theological ideas and largely depending on a good knowledge of Scripture

Where are I going with this? First, I am not advocating scrapping our liturgy. It has stood the test of time, and many of you, and I myself, derive deep meaning from it. (And besides, the Bishop might have a few words to say to me.) But then we have used it for many years, and we understand it. Are there ways we can make modifications so as to make it easier and more welcoming to the person who walks in the door for the first time?

What I want us all to do is to put ourselves in that person's place. Imagine you are a non-Christian, and you have been touched by God in some way, that God has put it into your head to visit a church. If you walked into St Mary's or All Saints, with a true desire to get to know Jesus, and you sat through a service, would you come back? Or would you find it all too confusing and tedious, and decide to give up the whole thing?

Or imagine you have invited a friend or neighbour to come with you to church. No doubt they would get a warm welcome at the door, but after going through all the unfamiliar liturgy and chanting of prayers, would they want to come back?

Or can you even imagine inviting a friend or neighbour? I may be wrong, but I suspect many of you are like me in being a little afraid to invite someone, because you don't think they'll like it. If a church service such as ours were a product, would you be excited about offering it to someone new?

I know full well that church is not entertainment. The best church service is the one which brings you closer to God and gives you something to think and to pray about; but there must be an element of excitement and yes, even entertainment, to engage a newcomer so that he or she can then move on to the deeper meaning.

As we gather for our congregational meeting today, I would like you to approach the recommendations of the Parish Review with all of this in mind. How do we change or adapt our services, so that we could say to our friends and neighbours, "Come with me to church on Sunday — *you'll love it!*"

Let us pray.

Lord, you have given us all the privilege of serving you and your people. Help us to bring to others the joy of loving and being loved by you which we ourselves feel. Guide us as we go forward in hope. Lord, let it be so. Amen.