
Filling the Church of God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 15 December 2024

Zephaniah 3:14-20 • Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:7-18



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

We talked last week about welcome — how important it is to show people a warm welcome when they walk in the door, and also that our services themselves should be welcoming, encouraging people to return the next Sunday. This philosophy of welcoming is an essential part of our duty of spreading the Gospel, akin to the idea of invitation. Christ, in his earthly ministry, always invited people to join with him. “Come with me, and I will show you how to fish for people,” he told Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:19). It was an invitation to join him, and also to share in inviting others, for the way to fish for people is to meet them where they are and invite them to join you in fellowship with Christ. Sometimes Christ invited himself, as when he said to Zacchaeus that he must eat at his house today (Luke 19:5). It was still an invitation to Zacchaeus to join in fellowship with Jesus, even

if it was Zacchaeus' house! Or when the two disciples asked him where he was staying, and he said, "Come and see" (John 1:39). Jesus was always inviting.

And so we must be always inviting others to join with us in worship. But we should realise that to many, churches are strange places, and even a little scary. So in all our interactions with others we must make it easy for them to say "yes!" to joining us — "yes" to Jesus Christ. Our services should be easy to join and easy to participate in. Some strangeness is inevitable, as with all new experiences; but we have to do our best to make it easy for a newcomer to say, "Yes, that service was pretty good — I think I'll come back next week."

We also need to make our services interesting for those who don't know much about the Bible. We are and will remain a Bible-based church, and there is much in the Bible, especially the Gospels, which are easy to understand on the first hearing (and yet, still reward a lifetime of study — that's the beauty of the Bible). Accompanying a reading with a little bit of explanation as necessary can be useful. Music must be accessible too, and so it must be chosen with care from both new and old sources. Sharing from other parishioners, particularly of the same age as oneself, is another way to draw newcomers into a service. And this means all ages, for seekers come in all ages.

These are just a few ideas I've had — I'm sure you will have other thoughts. But please do look at this from the standpoint of appealing to someone you know who has never or rarely entered a church. That will put us on the right track.

Don't interpret this to mean that we must entertain everyone. We should aim to attract them, but a little bit of challenge can be used as well. We learn this lesson from John the Baptist, who in our reading today balances invitation with challenge. He is the forerunner of Jesus, and he talks to the crowd about the one who is to come. Luke says that he preached in different ways to the people in order to get his message across. He would have suited his speech to his audience, just as I might speak to a Biblical scholar in a different way from how I speak to a person who has never read the Bible. And John wasn't afraid to get a bit rough, threatening them with the axe cutting down the trees and the fire burning the chaff. I don't think I'll be taking that approach. Just the same, the time will come when the whole truth of God's kingdom and the risk of not following Christ will need to be preached, for we are commissioned to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Let us begin with invitation and welcome, for God is above all a God of love. Our message is one of hope, and hope is something everyone can relate to. Our challenge is to seek out, find and above all retain new members of our parish, so that we may help them to become true disciples. Remember that we plant the tree, and God gives the growth. Think of our duty of welcome as a planting. If we get people started on the path to becoming disciples, God may then work in their hearts to bring them to himself.

I have such a vision of both of our churches filled with people young and old, all joining together in worship of our wonderful, loving Saviour. Apart from our duty of preaching the Gospel, wouldn't it simply be fun to see a full church? And think of what we could do for the community around us, with so many more willing hands! Think of a second parish fair here in autumn or a mid-winter event! Think of outreach to the schools! Think of a cafe church service! These are ideas which you have brought to me, which depend on having enough people to carry them out. We simply must grow our congregation. Wouldn't it be glorious if someday we had to build an extension on the church or hall to accomodate all our people?

So where do we start?

We start with prayer. Any change we make to service formats will include greater time for prayer. We pray to God, first for guidance on how we might change, and then for guidance moving forward. Prayer is essential, and I confess I have not been prioritising it enough. We should all pray at home as well, every day. Even just a few minutes of quiet prayer, opening ourselves to God's guidance, is valuable.

So we'll begin now. Let us close our eyes, quieten our bodies, and think this prayer:

Lord God, guide us as we seek to find and serve your people in this church.

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Let us be still in prayer. (*silence*)

Gracious Lord, we thank you that when we pray, you hear our prayers and will answer them as is best for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I will be praying and thinking over the Christmas break and into January about all this, and I encourage you to do the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.