

February 23rd, 2014

Isaiah 60:1-5, 18-22, Luke 14:15-24

Rev. Bruce Stanley

www.waitara.anglican.com.au

SERIES OVERVIEW:

Week 1: Engaging with God

Week 2: Invitation

Week 3: Mission

Week 4: Welcoming



WELCOMING: 2014 – YEAR OF MISSION

video?

What is welcoming?

My wife walked into a small hardware shop last year to buy me a present. And she was out of place. No-one spoke to her. No-one offered her help. And when she finally approached someone to ask for assistance, they clearly weren't interested in helping her.

This shop had **sent** us advertising. They clearly WANTED people to come to their shop. They wanted to sell her stuff. But when she got there, she clearly wasn't welcome. She was out of place. She was different to the people they were used to – probably, and it's only a guess, because she was a woman wanting to buy a power tool.

So what would you do in that situation? Leave and go to another shop.

As a Church, we are always, hopefully, inviting people to join us. And wouldn't it be strange if people were invited, and came along, only to feel that they weren't welcome? That no-one was particularly interested in them. That perhaps they didn't "fit in" with us.

What happens when people are invited, but then not welcomed? They go somewhere else.

1. The Welcome of the Lord – Isaiah 60

Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:3)

Isaiah 60 talks about who God is. Our God is a welcoming God. Our God wants to welcome people to come out of the darkness of the world, and into his light. And what Isaiah tells us is that God's glory is appealing. God's glory is attractive and beautiful. But because of the darkness of the world, people don't often see the beauty of a relationship with God.

III – If you look at the sky at night, you see some beautiful things. (PIC) But if you look even with a small telescope, you'll see even more! (PIC) If you look with a really powerful telescope, like Hubble, then you'll see some breathtaking things... (PICS)

This image is called the Hubble eXtreme Deep Field (XDF). It is the deepest image of the Universe ever made. The image covers an area less than one 30 millionth of the whole sky. Yet it reveals about 5500 galaxies, some of them so distant that we see them when the Universe was less than 5% of its current age.

Our desire in welcoming people into our Church family is that they would find the telescope that helps them see the real beauty and depth of living in a relationship with our amazing God. And that telescope, the thing that enables people to see God's great light, is **the Word of God, the Spirit of God and the people of God**. We don't just want people to meet US, and to get to know US. We want people to meet GOD and get to know HIM. And they do that through the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God.

To be a welcoming Church, we need to understand our purpose – to bring people into community with GOD himself. We do that by helping them to feel welcome here. We don't want to be just "friendly". We want to be friends, so they might become friends with God.

So what does that look like? What are we welcoming people into? Let's look at Luke 14. Page...

The feast of the kingdom of God

In Luke 14, Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. And the leaders were watching him carefully. They were trying to find ways to catch him out and discredit him. And Jesus talks about parties. Banquets. And who you should invite. Interesting conversation. And a man there says:

"Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Yes. Blessed is the person who will go to heaven and celebrate the eternal feast of the kingdom of heaven. Obviously that would be good. And I'm sure there were a lot of people sitting at that dinner table thinking: "Yes, I'm looking forward to that. That will be excellent."

And perhaps we think that when we sit here in church. "How good is this!" How nice it is to be in a loving church. How nice to be looking forward to heaven together. This is good. This is a great community of God. Looking forward to the banquet.

Sadly, as good as this is, it can become a very insular Christianity. Thinking about how good it is. Thinking about how good our future is. And what does Jesus say about this?

He **challenges** us. He says: Yes, it is good. But what about all the people who aren't here? Have you thought about them? He challenges us to think about the people who are missing out. And he puts them into two categories with this parable: People who have excuses. And people who come.

He says this man was having a banquet. And he invites lots of people. But they can't come. They have excuses...

I bought a field. I've got to try out my new oxen. I just got married.

So there are all these excuses. And isn't that true sometimes? We invite people along to Church, or we share with them about God, but people aren't interested. There are excuses. "I'm not really into all that". I'm too busy. I've just got married. Bought some new oxen. Have to try them out!

But here's the challenge. What does Jesus say? Do we give up?

The Challenge. The Cost.

The story continues: the master says to his servants:

*'Go out **quickly** into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'*

22 *" 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'*

23 *"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and **compel** them to come in, so that my house will be full.*

There is still room. There is still MORE room for people to join in the banquet of heaven.

Go QUICKLY and COMPEL them! This is urgent! This is important!

Often when we invite people, and they turn us down, we can think: "Oh well. But I'm still happy! I know God and I have a great eternal future with him! Yay for heaven!" But Jesus says: "Go out and invite more. Now! Forget about the people that just turned you down. There are plenty **more** to invite! Invite the ones outside your comfort zone. Invite the lame, the cripple, the blind. The people you don't relate to very well, the people who make you uncomfortable. Invite them all, and welcome them all, because there is still room!

And this was the problem with the Pharisees. They were very happy to bring people to their Church and welcome them, as long as it was **comfortable** for them. Friends, neighbours, family. But what about everyone else? Are we ready to welcome people who may make us uncomfortable? People who are different to us?

III – I don't like buying hats. Because a lot of hats say "one size fits all". And I have a big head. So I need an extra large hat. I need a hat that understands my needs! I need a hat

that knows that I'm different. I don't need a hat that says: All you heads are the same!" I need a hat that says: "I was made for you!"

When people come to a Church, often we try to welcome people by fitting them in somewhere. How old they are. What language they speak. What colour they are. What hobbies they have. Family person, single person, male, female – we often welcome people we think who will “fit”. And sadly, if they don't “fit”, like the Pharisees, they are not welcomed well. Church can become “one size fits all”, but if you don't fit that mould, you won't be welcomed.

And this is where welcoming costs us.

Welcoming people means sacrifice. When **you** welcome people, **you** invite them into a relationship with **you** – and that's hard work! It's hard work getting to know someone and caring about their needs. Especially when they are very different to us.

But I wonder if you noticed the passage right after this chapter in Luke? It's the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Jesus talks about his desire to save people who are lost. And this is why Jesus died. He died for the lost. He died so people could find their way to God. He died to deal with sin and open the door into God's eternal banquet.

This is the joy and hope we have. And this is the joy and hope God wants ALL people to know. The cost for God to give that to us was Jesus on the cross. So what is the cost to us? Does it really compare to what he has already done for us?

Jesus is saying that we can't simply be happy with being saved ourselves. It's simply not enough to say: “I'm so happy I'm a Christian and I'm going to heaven!” We simply cannot rest with that knowledge. We must not just invite, but **welcome** people to this banquet. Because there is still more room! It is urgent and important.

A real Church welcome says: “We KNOW that one size does **not** fit all. We recognize that you are a unique person, and you have unique needs, but we have a unique God who can meet all your needs. So I will do whatever I can to make sure you have the opportunity to meet him. I will welcome you, because Jesus welcomed me.”

Welcoming is not just about fitting people in. It's about YOU, and ME, entering into a kingdom relationship with people who are different to each of us.

VIDEO – Have a look at this video. Can we as a church say these things?