

The welcoming church

Various texts

I'm sure we've all been in the situation where something has broken and we've tried to patch things up without the right equipment or we've tried to mend the situation without the right tool. Here are some examples where people have fixed a problem using unusual methods.



< This individual went into their kitchen and decided that they needed to whip some cream, but alas, they couldn't find the electric beater! No problem, two forks jammed in a power drill ought to do the trick!



< Imagine if, one morning, you hopped in your car only to discover that someone had knocked off your side mirror. Not a problem if you have a spare hand mirror at your disposal. I probably would've just driven without one, but, this has got to be better than none I think.

> Sticking with the car theme, what do you do if all of a sudden your muffler falls off? Run to your wardrobe, that's what you do! I would have never thought of doing this. That's probably a good thing.



< I bet you didn't know that scissors make good replacement doorknobs? Well, you do now. It's a surprisingly common quick fix actually, in my hours of research I saw quite a few pictures where people have used scissors just like this.

> And finally if ever you find that your doorbell stops working, then here's an example of what you need to do. "The door bell is missing" says the sign, "Please shake bottle of rocks."



We might smile at these attempts at a quick fix but we've all been there at some point, using the heel of a shoe to hammer in a nail or some sticky tape to fix a leaky pipe. The situation might work momentarily, but we know that to do the job properly we need to pick the right tool or have the right equipment for the task.

Now part of my job as a minister is to ask whether we're using the right tools for the task of ministry. Is our church a place where ministry is done with makeshift methods, or are we building solid foundations in the right way and with the right tools? I'm convinced that we're already getting some things right. As a church we are very clear on what our goal is: our goal is to introduce people to the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ; to see people place their faith in him; and to help them continue on as Christ's disciple. That's the goal, and it ought to be the goal of every church. We're convinced that the two big tools at our disposal are prayer and the

word of God; we pray that people will come to know and grow in Christ and we trust that God's word will help them do that.

But this morning I suggest that there is another tool that we ought to sharpen up. This tool is not as important as prayer and God's word, but used wisely I think it will help God's word to find its mark and I think it will help us see clearly how God is answering our prayers. The tool that I'm sure will help is the tool of welcoming and hospitality; the ministry where we open ourselves up to strangers, inviting them to find a home in our community here at church. It's my conviction that God uses this tool to grow his church, and, if we pay some attention to the way we welcome others, then our ministry will have a greater impact.

Why am I so convinced that welcoming plays a key part in our ministry tool kit? Well, that's what I want to show you in today's sermon. I think the concept of welcoming the outsider is found throughout the Bible, and it's a concept which starts with God himself—God loves being hospitable.

Let's start in the Old Testament with a verse from the Old Testament Law. In Deuteronomy 10.18 we hear Moses is preaching to Israel, and he's describing God's nature: God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, he says, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. God expected the ancient nation of Israel—his nation—to be place where the foreigner and stranger were made welcome. Unlike other nations, it was actually a part of Israel's law to show hospitality.

And so it followed that good Israelites were always keen to practice hospitality. Job is one of the most righteous characters we meet in the Old Testament. In Job 31 he lists all the ways in which he has sought to please God, including a commitment to truthfulness and faithfulness to his wife, and then he adds this: no stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler. Why was this welcoming behaviour important in the Old Testament? Because God himself loves the foreigner.

Move to the New Testament and we see that God is still in the business of welcoming others, but this time the focus is not on an earthly kingdom but on the Kingdom of God. It's in the New Testament that we hear the gospel message at its clearest: through Jesus Christ God is welcoming sinners into his eternal kingdom.

To illustrate this truth Jesus would often tell stories where underserving people are shown hospitality and welcomed into the most lavish of surrounds. One example is the story of the banquet in Luke 14. Jesus paints the scene of a rich man who'd prepared a great banquet; the table had been set with tasty meats and freshly baked breads, the wine was ready to be poured, the waiters were all at their stations. But the people he invited had all declined with ridiculous excuses: "I've bought a field, and now I have to look at what it is that I've just bought" says one; "I've just bought some oxen" said another, "and now I have to try them out". No one buys such things without looking at the merchandise first. The point is that they're making up

a false excuse and rudely rejecting the offer of a feast. And so the rich man decides to send out his helpers to gather in all the poor and so he welcomes in the lowest of the low into his house where they can dine and drink until the early hours of the morning. And Jesus is saying that this is what God is like. He extends a wide invitation for people to enter his household; he wants to welcome people into his church.

Now this story also teaches us that not everyone wants to be welcomed. God's invitation requires a response, and so the Bible also talks about us welcoming God. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is Revelation 3:20 Here I am! says Jesus, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. Jesus Christ, God himself, he wants to come and eat with us, but we have to open the door and let him inside.

Now when you let a stranger into your life things never remain the same. Maybe you discovered this when you got married, maybe the big change came when you welcomed your first child, I've found that even getting a pet can mix things up a lot. If you've ever tried to toilet train a puppy then you better be prepared to replace your carpet when you're done, because they learn eventually but not before wrecking absolute havoc. Inviting someone in can be disruptive, and Jesus is no different; he'll start rearranging things in your life, make no mistake, and maybe that's why we are tempted to keep the door shut.

Or maybe we realise that our house is a mess and we'd be embarrassed to have Jesus step over the threshold. Certainly I've met people who feel this way before. "My life isn't good enough to be a Christian!" they say. Well, Jesus isn't expecting a clean house. He's expecting to see a lot of mess, but that's the reason why he's knocking. He's the kind of guest who wants to come in and clean things up for us. And if we do open the door, then he'll bring us to be welcomed by his Father. John Chapter 14: My Father's house has many rooms; Jesus says, I am going there to prepare a place for you ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me. Again it's the gospel message using the language of hospitality and welcome.

So welcoming and hospitality is something that begins with God and the message we proclaim about him: he is the God of welcoming. Through his Son Jesus he's opened the door wide for all sorts of people to enjoy what it is that he has to offer, and he asks that we respond by welcoming him into our lives. The very basics of the Christian faith can be understood through the concept of welcoming and hospitality.

And so it's no surprise to discover that when Christians gather together, welcoming and hospitality are at the centre of our activities. In Romans 15:7 Paul instructs his readers to accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Just like the ancient Israelites imitated God's concern for the foreigner, God's modern day people are also in the business of imitating God's heart. Just as God has accepted and welcomed us so too we are asked to welcome and accept others.

This is why you have these little instructions about welcoming peppered throughout the New Testament. One example is from our second reading, Hebrews 13:2. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, the writer says. And then, in the second half of the verse, he indicates another reason for pursuing this form of ministry. By so doing he says, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. What's he referring to? Well, there are a couple of episodes in Judges where some Old Testament characters entertained angels without knowing it, but traditionally the best known example occurs in Genesis 18.

You heard the story earlier in the service: Abraham and his wife Sarah have been promised a son in their old age, and as they are waiting for God's promises to materialise there comes a day when they are visited by three men. Abraham is the perfect host, jumping up from his seat and making them feel welcome, offering them some refreshment, instructing Sarah to bake some bread, preparing a calf for them to eat. And the men are there with a message from God, they say that the long awaited son will be born within the coming year.

I think it's an example of a pattern that we see repeated throughout the Bible. It seems that God often uses hospitality as the context for his work. When Hebrews says that people have hosted angels, the point isn't that Angels are often in need of a feed or that if we open our house we might get lucky and have a special celestial visitor. As we see in Genesis 18, Angels are agents of God's work; they were bringing news of God's unfolding plan to Abraham and Sarah. The point is that God does his work through hospitality.

Move to the New Testament and we see the same pattern. When Jesus sends his disciples out on mission trip in Luke 10, his instructions are for them to not take a purse or bag or sandals but to allow others to welcome them in and provide what they need. God's work was to be done in the context of hospitality. As we follow the spread of the church in the book of Acts we see that hospitality plays a major part in the strategy. In Acts 18 we read of one household led by Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They played host to Paul as he conducted his ministry, later on the chapter they invite Apollos into their home and train him up in theology. In Romans 16 we read that they are hosting a church in their house. So I think there is a clear pattern: God works through the hospitality of his people. It's a tool that he uses to accompany the regular ministry of the word of God.

And so this leads us to a practical challenge. Are we putting this tool to use? How might we put this tool to use? Well, in light of the Syrian refugee crisis the Archbishop has thrown out a challenge to every parish:

I am calling upon parishes all across our diocese, not only to pray for these victims of persecution, but to step up and be prepared to do whatever is within their power to provide a warm and generous welcome, coupled with practical assistance, to ensure that those who come to find safety in Australia are afforded the best possible chance to make a new start and benefit as fully as

possible from the peace, freedom and opportunity that Australia offers.

The details of how Anglican churches can help are yet to be laid out, but when more details come to light we might find some opportunities. But we should expect God to be at work as we welcome.

In the meantime there are lots of opportunities to be open to God's work as we practice hospitality in our congregations. Every Sunday we should be ready to welcome the people that God sends. What has the Bible taught us? God sends people and he works through welcoming! Do you see someone new? Can you arrange a time to have them for lunch? As one friend said to me, all it takes is a BBQ chicken and bag of bread rolls, that's all it takes to welcome someone whom God has sent.

To help us out with this we're trying something new here at 10.00 am service. I'll be visiting small groups to talk at greater length about this, but in a few weeks time you'll start to see some people wearing green nametags like these. If you see someone with a green name tag then they are doing a special job. It's their task to be on the look out for new visitors to our church and to make sure they don't get overlooked, to ensure they feel welcome.

If you're a regular and you see a friend wearing a green name tag, then leave them alone! Don't you go up and start talking with them because they need to be free to connect with the newcomers. Better yet, after church finishes why don't you sacrifice a conversation with a friend and connect with someone you don't yet know. The conversation you have could well be part of God's plan. Why? Because God works through welcoming! He always has, and so it's a tool that we should get used to using.

Will you allow me to lead us in prayer?