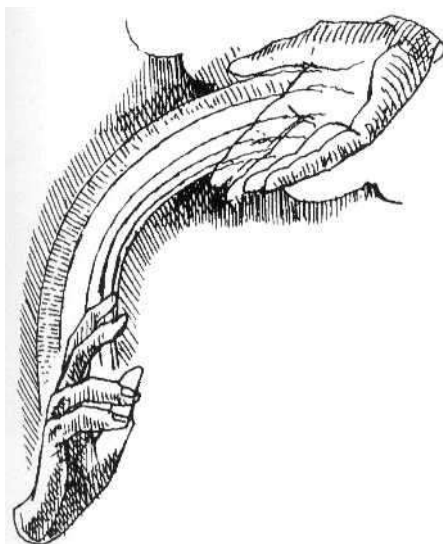


All Are Welcome



Lent 2007

St Peter and St Paul, Seal

Session 1

The God who welcomes

Introduction

What does it feel like to be welcome...?

Think of words and phrases which describe what it is like and why it matters to be welcome.

The Four Quaker Questions

1. *Where did you live as a child (5-11)?*
2. *How was your home heated?*
3. *Who, what or where was a source of warmth for you?*
4. *When and how did God become a source of warmth for you?*

Bible study: Matthew 22.1-14 The Great Banquet

Background

- Matthew's version of this parable tells of a king who gives a banquet to celebrate the wedding of his son. (The version in Luke 14 speaks only of a great dinner given by a rich man – there is no mention of a wedding, nor of the guest who does not have a wedding garment.)
- Wedding imagery is usually significant in the Bible. It often symbolises the union of God with his people. (e.g. Hosea 2.19 “I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice.” Rev 19.7 “the marriage of the Lamb has come”)
- Weddings were not so much about romantic love in Hebrew thought, as about the beginning of a new family, a new kingdom (in the case of royal marriage), a new world order.
- Those who are invited to the banquet are not just being invited to come to a party but also to participate in this new future, therefore.
- It was common practice for the host to provide garments for the guests to wear. (There was a similar custom around funerals in England until fairly recent times – providing black gloves, at least, and sometimes complete sets of clothes for mourners who had been invited to attend.) The guest who did not have the right clothing, therefore, was not necessarily too poor to afford any better, but simply refusing to join in with the joy of the occasion.

Questions:

Imagine this story from the point of view of the various people in it.

The king

The guests who were invited, but did not come

The guests rounded up at the last minute

The man who was not wearing the wedding garment

- *If we could talk to each of these people, what would they tell us about this event?*
- *Who do you most identify with in the story? Would you have answered differently at other times in your life?*
- *What might this story have meant to the early church (which was made up of Jewish and Gentile believers, and which had been recently cast out of Judaism at the time Matthew gospel was written.)*
- *Do you think there are limits on God's welcome? How do you feel about the last sentence of the story, "many are called, but few are chosen."*

Round up and reflection

"I will not leave you orphaned."

John 14.18

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Isaiah 66.13

How real do these words seem to you?

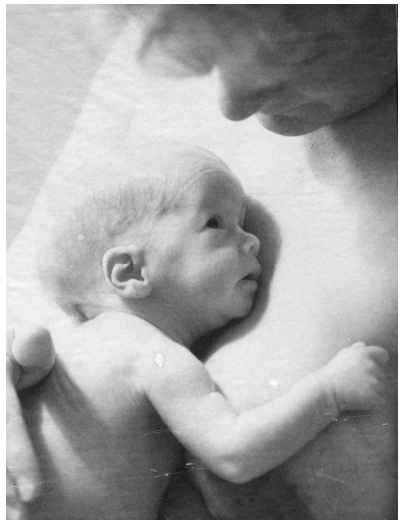
Psalm 131

O Lord, my heart is not proud;
my eyes are not raised in haughty looks.

I do not occupy myself with great matters,
with things that are too high for me.

But I have quieted and stilled my soul,
like a weaned child on its mother's breast;
so my soul is quieted within me.

O Israel, trust in the Lord,
from this time forth for evermore.



Session 2

“Behold I stand at the door and knock”

Introduction

What stories can you tell of guests you have entertained?

How do you feel about entertaining or having people to stay?

What do you do in order to be ready?

Have you ever had “the guest from hell”? What made them so difficult?

What makes a good guest?

Bible Study 1 : Luke 1.26-38

The annunciation to Mary has been painted in many different ways. Look at these pictures.

<http://vrcoll.fa.pitt.edu/uag/Art-Anytime-Page/Lochoff-pages/pages/17-Martini-Annunciation.htm>

<http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/angelico/p-angelic3.htm>

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/botticelli/cestello.jpg.html>

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/euwl/ho_56.70.htm

<http://keptar.demasz.hu/arthp/art/a/antonell/virgin.jpg>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/paintingflowers/paintings/annunciation_rossetti.shtml

What kind of reactions do they reveal of Mary to her angelic visitor, who brings news of an even more life-changing guest, the Son of God?

Which of these pictures reflects how you think you would have reacted?

Bible Study 2: John 1. 1-18

- *“The Word became flesh [in Christ] and lived among us” How does this passage describe people’s reactions to this guest among them?*
- *Can you think of examples of people in the Bible who welcomed, or rejected, Christ? Why do you think they acted as they did?*
- *What difference did Christ make to those who met him?*
- *What difference does your faith make to your life?*
- *Is Christ an easy guest to welcome?*

Round up and reflection

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” *Rev 3.20*

How ready are you to “open the door”? What might that mean in your life?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the world, come to us in your mercy:
we look to you to save and help us.

By your cross and your life laid down, you set your people free:
we look to you to save and help us.

When they were ready to perish, you saved your disciples:
we look to you to come to our help.

In the greatness of your mercy, loose us from our chains,
forgive the sins of all your people.

Make yourself known as our Saviour and mighty deliverer;
save and help us that we may praise you.

Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus:
hear our prayer and be with us always.

And when you come in your glory:
make us to be one with you and to share the life of your kingdom.

Session 3

“Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.”

Introduction

Do we live in a welcoming society? Look in a newspaper for stories which illustrate the welcome (or lack of it) that we give to one another. Who does our society find it particularly hard to welcome? Are there people who we think shouldn't be welcomed?

Bible Study: Acts 9.1-31

Background

Saul was a zealous and committed Jewish Pharisee, convinced that Jesus had not been the Messiah, and that those who proclaimed that he was were a danger to the Jewish faith. He had been present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7.58-8.3) and had been at the forefront of a violent and bitter persecution of this new movement.

He was born in Tarsus, on the Southern Coast of Turkey. As well as being Jewish, he was also a Roman citizen (probably a status he had inherited from his father.) Like many people in the multi-cultural society of the Middle East of that time, he was known interchangeably by two names – the Hebrew *Saul*, and the Roman *Paul*, depending on who he was mixing with at the time. It is not the case that he drops the Hebrew name when he “converts” to Christianity, simply that his eventual mission to the non-Jewish Roman Empire made Paul the more sensible name to use.

It is important to understand that, at the time of his journey to Damascus, the “church” was still seen, both from within and without, as a group within Judaism, rather than as a separate religion. Saul is attempting to purify his own faith, not to attack those of a completely different one.

Questions

- *What happens in this passage? Who are the characters and groups involved?*
- *How does each of these groups and individuals feel about and act towards Saul as the story progresses?*
- *Would you have trusted him?*
- *How do we decide who is “us” and who is “them”?*
- *What light does this shed on issues of cultural identity that bother us today, such as what it means to be British?*

- *Do you think the Church is a welcoming institution?*
- *What about our particular church? How can we make people feel welcome?*

Round up and Reflection

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” *Romans 15.7*

How has Christ welcomed us? What did it cost him to welcome us?

A Song of God’s Love

R. Let us welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed us.

Let us love one another: for love is from God. **R.**

Those who love are born of God and know God: but those who do not love know nothing of God, for God is love. **R.**

Those who dwell in love are dwelling in God and God in them.
There is no room for fear in love: love which is perfected banishes fear. **R.**

Of we do not love those whom we have seen: We cannot love God whom we have not seen. **R.**

This commandment we have from God, that those who love God must also love their neighbour. **R.**

