

ROMANS 12:13
ST JOHN'S; 3.9.17; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

I am increasingly concerned about the future of this congregation. I'm sure you are, too. It's discouraging when we look around and see how few people come along each Sunday. I've just put together the rota for the next three months, and there are ever fewer people to do readings and prayers, to act as Sidespeople, and so on.

We're not alone. There are lots of other churches with older congregations, whose members are gradually becoming unable to attend church on a Sunday, and where there are very few, if any, new people coming in.

The question is, what can we do about it, if anything? You might expect me to say that we can pray. And that's definitely the first step. I hope you do pray for St John's – a few months ago, we gave out these bookmarks with a prayer for growth. Have you, at the very least, been using that prayer? If not, why not? If we're not praying for our church, we're telling the Lord in effect that we don't care what happens to it in the future, that we don't care whether or not there's a worshipping community here at St John's, giving him the glory which is his due. You may have heard the French expression, *après moi, le déluge*. It can mean, "after me, let the flood come," in other words, "I don't care what happens after I'm gone." If we're not praying, and doing, all that we can to work with the Lord in breathing new life into this congregation, then we're guilty of the same attitude.

Prayer is the first step – and it's absolutely essential. But there are other things which each one of us could be doing. Today, I want to talk about one of Paul's instructions to the church at Rome: *open your homes to strangers* (v 13) – or in other translations, *practise hospitality*.

PRACTISE HOSPITALITY

When I was at University, I worshipped at the University Chaplaincy. Hospitality was taken very seriously there, especially when it came to Sunday lunch. Most Sundays, after the service, each of us would either be taking two or three people back for lunch, or going to someone else's for lunch. It was very important, especially for Freshers, to be made welcome, to have the opportunity to get to know other Christians, and to make friends. I was reminded how important it was by a friend of mine: I'd invited her to Sunday lunch during her first term at University, when I hardly knew her. That simple invitation helped her through a very difficult patch, as she tried to settle in to University life.

Of course, Sunday lunch isn't where hospitality begins or ends! When was the last time you invited a church member into your home, if only for a cup of coffee? And when was the last time you invited someone who was new to church? *Open your homes to strangers*, not just to people you've known for a long time, says Paul. A more accurate translation of the Greek would read "pursue hospitality". The C3 Greek scholar Origen commented on this verse:

We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after and look carefully for, strangers, to pursue

them and search them out everywhere, less perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads.¹

Inviting people into our homes isn't always the cultural norm. I remember a Vicar in a placement church during my training, telling me that when she'd visited one family, she was told she was the only non-family member to cross the threshold in decades! When I was a curate, we held a few dinner parties, and some people's response to the invitation was a very suspicious, "What for?!"! But we shouldn't let the norms of the surrounding culture put us off. As Christians, we're called to be counter-cultural. In our gospel reading today, Jesus says, *If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me* (Matthew 16:24) – we're to follow Jesus, not our family, friends or neighbours. And Jesus himself had something to say about hospitality: in his description of the Final Judgment, he commends the *righteous people* in these words: *I was a stranger and you received me in your homes* (Matthew 25:35).

I confess that I'm not the best role-model here. I use the excuses of busyness, pressure of family life, an untidy home and so on, and don't often open my home to church family members or strangers. Maybe you have other excuses – lack of space, lack of money, lack of cooking skills . . . But hospitality doesn't have to be expensive or complicated, and most people couldn't care less how untidy your home is! What's important is the welcome you offer, and the love you show people in Jesus' name.

Paul and Jesus aren't the only people in the New Testament to encourage Christians to practise hospitality. Peter writes, *Open your homes to each other without complaining* (1 Peter 4:9), and the writer to the Hebrews, *Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it* (Hebrews 13:2). It's all part of loving one another, building relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are the Lord's family in this place, but if that's going to mean anything, we need to be part of one another's lives, and we need to be genuinely welcoming newcomers – and a genuine welcome goes far beyond a smile, a handshake, a 'hallo, nice to see you' (although, of course, all those things are vital when strangers first come through our door).

And that brings me on to practising hospitality here in church. If we're to welcome strangers into our homes, how much more are we to welcome strangers into our church family home? A couple of weeks ago, I went to a service in a church where I'd never been before. I won't say where it was, but it wasn't in Wrexham. When I arrived, there were a couple of people standing by the door, talking to each other – they barely even acknowledged my 'Good Morning'. I went in, and sat down in the back row. No-one took any notice of me before the service started. A latecomer joined me on the back row, and ignored me except when I asked if he was going up to receive Communion. After the service had finished, still no-one spoke to me, either where I was sitting, or as I left. I enjoyed the service itself, but I felt as if no-one there noticed, still less cared, that I was there!

You might think that wouldn't happen here at St John's. But I've seen visitors come into church and walk past the Sidespeople, who are too busy talking to someone else to notice a newcomer. And I've spoken to people who have been welcomed initially, but who say that it's very difficult to get beyond that initial welcome. Maybe they'd have appreciated being invited into someone's home for a coffee, but no-one's made that effort with them. It's not everyone's experience, but it is true for some. And unless some more people volunteer as Sidespeople, we may not even have anyone available to welcome church members and visitors alike into our church family home.

Another experience I had recently was when I received an invitation. It was to go along to a gathering of cyclists at a local café. Unfortunately, the person who invited me (who I haven't actually met), wasn't able to be there, and in the end, I flunked it and didn't go. It just seemed too difficult, to go along to meet a group of strangers in a strange place, with no-one even vaguely looking out for me!

But at least I had received an invitation! So . . . when was the last time you invited someone to come to church with you? Ten years ago, Tearfund sponsored a survey in the UK which concluded that three million non-churchgoers in this country would go to church if only someone invited them! As I discovered, going into a strange place, with strange people, is very daunting. It's so much easier if you've got

someone with you, who can show you where to go and what to do, and introduce you to other people.

When visitors come into our services, they're much more likely to come back again if they feel truly welcome. If that welcome extends to an invitation to coffee during the week, that person will be even more likely to come back again. And if you're able to invite someone along and help them to feel at home with us, that's even better!

So, if you're concerned about the future of this congregation, please do both pray and act. Practising, or pursuing, hospitality is something we can all do, as we seek to live out our calling as Jesus' followers, to extend to others the welcome he's given to each one of us.

¹ Quoted by C E B Cranfield in The Epistle to the Romans (Vol 2), (Edinburgh, Clark, 1979), p 640 (footnote)