



Welcome to our Sunday Service (30/05/21)

A welcoming Church

Prepared by Kathryn

By grace alone somehow I stand
Where even angels fear to tread
Invited by redeeming love
Before the throne of God above
He pulls me close with nail- scarred hands
Into his everlasting arms.

When condemnation grips my heart
And satan tempts me to despair
I hear the voice that scatters fear
The Great I Am The Lord is here
Oh praise the One who fights for me
And shields my soul eternally

Boldly I approach Your throne
Blameless now I'm running home
By your blood I come
Welcomed as your own
Into the arms of majesty

Behold the bright and risen Son
More beauty than this world has known
I'm face to face with love Himself
His perfect spotless righteousness
A thousand years, a thousand tongues
Are not enough to sing his praise

I'm running into your arms

This is the art of celebration
Knowing we're free from condemnation
Oh praise the One, praise the One
Who make an end to all my sin.

Rend Collective



Plants in need of good homes!!

Mervyn has grown lots of lupins, cosmos and daisies this year and has several spare to give away. If you would like some or know somebody who would, please get in touch!



Father God, we come before you today and bring you our worship. Thank you that because of what Jesus achieved for humanity, you welcome us into your presence. Your word says that you, “bring us into your banqueting house under the banner of your love.” Help us to engage with your love afresh today. For those who are feeling lonely or rejected today we ask for a special awareness of your open arms and warm embrace.

Thank you that you know the heart concerns of every person that is reading this prayer and- we bring these concerns to you now.

Thank you for the peace we experience in this country. We pray again for the peace of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Would you bring your peace to every heart that seeks you today. **We pray in Jesus name, Amen.**

Today we are going to look at our next core value - to be a welcoming church. It's been wonderful to welcome many others to our on-line services, but when lockdown ends we don't want to hide away behind the walls of a building again, we want to remain accessible and welcoming to everyone, whether they are able to join us physically or not.



The word 'welcome' derives from the old English word 'wilcuma', a noun meaning 'a desired guest, a guest whom we receive with pleasure'. How wonderful to be on the receiving end of a genuine welcome, to be a desired guest, a guest who is received with pleasure.

Perhaps we can remember times that we have experienced being made to feel really welcomed. Equally, we may have had an experience of not being made welcome, maybe even you were met with coldness and hostility which led you in no doubt that you were not welcome. I know I've experienced that and it can be really hurtful and isolating.

I've had a few interesting discussions with people recently about what sorts of things can make them feel welcome or unwelcome. Some of the comments included feeling unwelcome if they are part of a group that is clicky, where they are ignored or left out of a



conversation, or brushed aside when they do join in; picking up a sense that they are being judged against some sort of standard or criteria, or they are find themselves put down by a superior attitude. Some found a silent room unwelcoming and preferred some background noise. Someone else interestingly found going to a spotlessly clean, tidy house uncomfortable and unwelcoming. Others found being kept on the door step unwelcoming, others felt they *couldn't* welcome someone in if the house is a mess! One person said that they felt much more welcome if they were *offered* a plate of biscuits rather than having to walk across a room to get one. A relaxed, chatty environment was said to be welcoming whilst someone else commented that a warm smile, twinkly eye contact and a hug made them feel really welcome, (hugs have previously been off limits thanks to covid!) whilst someone else wanted to be acknowledged and spoken to, but found being overly talked to or interrogated by lots of questions unwelcoming.

We've discovered the root meaning of the word 'welcome'. Lets turn to Genesis 1 To find the origin of welcome itself.

Mervyn read this verse last week and referred to this loving, respectful community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the amazing truth that we are welcomed into this community. In this verse, we get to listen in to an amazing conversation within the Godhead.

26Then God said, "Let Us (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) make man in Our image, according to Our likeness [not physical, but a spiritual personality and moral likeness]; and let them have complete authority over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, and over the entire earth, and over everything that creeps and crawls on the earth." 27So God created man in His own image, in the image and likeness of God He created him; male and female He created them.

In this conversation, one member of the God-head is speaking to the other two... 'Let us make man In our image'. To say that we are made in God's image is to recognise those special qualities that God has uniquely placed within humans that allows God to be clearly seen and obvious in humans. Why did he create us in his image? So that he might welcome us into a close relationship with him as his children. That he might welcome us as his very own with open access to all that he is and all that he wants to lavish on us.

Those of you with children may remember preparing a room to welcome the new baby. Pictures on the wall, a mobile hanging over the cot, black out curtains, a chair placed for cuddles and looking at picture books. We are welcoming the new baby into our lives as our very own, placing colour, shape and texture to stimulate the senses as baby begins to connect with us as his/her parents.

God prepared a planet that he might welcome us as his very own.

In Genesis 3: 8 we see God spending time walking with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

And they heard the voice of the Lord God, walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.

We don't know if God visibly walked with them, but we note that this garden walk included both sound and some sort of presence among the trees. The reason they were hiding from God was because they were covered with the shame of having broken close relationship with God through doing the one thing he had told them was vital not to do! They had to leave the garden and live with the consequences as has every generation since.

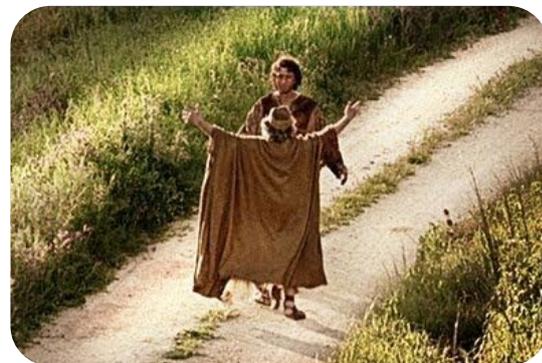


But the welcome within the God-head toward humans has not diminished, and as God sets apart the Jewish nation as a people group that he refers to as his very own, his treasured possession, a people belonging to him through whom he will ultimately welcome the human race back home, he gives them an instruction about being a welcoming people that is a core value straight from the heart of The God-head.

33 “ ‘When a foreigner/stranger resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 34 The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born.^a Love them as yourself,^b for you were foreigners^c in Egypt.^d I am the Lord your God” Leviticus 19: 33-34

God is reminding them of how it felt to be mis-treated and unwelcome in someone else's patch and insisting that they must welcome the stranger as one of their own, as if native-born and love them as their own. Welcome and belonging is so important to God that he sows it into the children of Israel early on. In the same way that God wants them to know that they belonged to him, he wanted his people to extend that sense of belonging to strangers and foreigners.

Jump forward to the New Testament to the account in **Luke 15: 11-32** that was read to us earlier, and we see Jesus portraying God as The Father watching and waiting, longing to welcome a wayward, but repentant child back home where he belongs. And what a welcome he is shown. There could be no doubt that this child, in spite of the fact that he had walked away and squandered everything his Father had given him felt welcomed back to where he fully belonged - one of the family, even though he recognised that he only deserved to be taken back on the basis of a servant.



Figuratively, we are that son, away from God, messing up our lives and trashing the lives that God has given us.

Jesus is describing through this parable, the wonder of The Gospel: that although humans broke the close relationship with God, and have wandered far away, squandering the entitlement they were created for as a dearly loved child, God is waiting for each child to get to the end of themselves and come home to where they belong, restored and celebrated as a son or daughter. He watches from afar, ready to run towards us and welcome us home the moment we begin to come, ready to tell him what a mess we've made.

If welcome is central within The Godhead; if welcome and belonging are so significant and important to God that he sows it into the heart of his people by giving them a direct instruction to welcome strangers as if they belong, If the Majestic and Glorious God has welcomed us back into his arms in spite of where we've been and what we've done, then as a church we need to plant welcome and belonging firmly within our core values.

God has welcomed us back into relationship with himself. It is in the very heart of God's nature to welcome and he calls us to demonstrate his welcome to the outsider on his behalf. We see that instruction to welcome others brought into the New Testament.

Welcome and receive (to your hearts) one another, then, even as Christ has welcomed and received you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:7 AMP

As always, Jesus himself is the one that we turn to see what being welcoming actually looks like. **Who did Jesus welcome?**

Rachel has been doing some study around this question and I'm going to borrow from her notes a little for this section.

Rachel highlighted three groups of people whom Jesus very specifically welcomed.

Firstly, he welcomed children.

In Mark 10: 13-16 we read....

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.



Jesus didn't treat the children in the same way as the adults were, as a bit of a nuisance and perhaps a bit inappropriate to be near Jesus. Instead he told the disciples off, and welcomed the children. Notice in the text that the people brought the children to Jesus in order that he might place his hands on them in blessing, but Jesus goes way beyond that... He took them in his arms, touched them and blessed them. His welcome was more extravagant than expected, his message to each child was crystal clear, "You matter, you are special and you are welcome in the arms of God."

Secondly, Jesus welcomed people with issues!

In **Luke 19: 19** we see Jesus asking himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house and it caused moral outrage. How could Jesus go and eat with this scum? He was a tax collector and had become rich by ripping people off. Jesus was asking for a meal bought with, in effect, stolen money - that's outrageous! But you see, Jesus welcomes us right where we are, right now, with all of our baggage, sin, mess and problems. He didn't say "Zacchaeus, go and sort your life out first, and then make me dinner with honest money, THEN you'll be welcome. No, it was that encounter, being welcomed by Jesus that caused the transformation in Zacchaeus's life, and THEN his behaviour radically altered.

Thirdly, Jesus welcomed the outcast

In **John 4**: Jesus deliberately sets out to cross paths with a woman who was an outcast in society, who had a reputation and not a good reputation! She had to collect her water from the well, in the heat of the day, on her own to avoid the racism and the rejection, and hostile judgement she experienced by those who looked down their noses at her. She wasn't valued and she wasn't welcome in her society. On this particular day, she had an extraordinary encounter with the Son of God, who DID welcome her and DID value her. What matters to God, is not the social codes and rules, but that each person knows that they matter, they belong and that God runs to meet them with arms reaching out in welcome. No matter what you have done or what state your life is in, your transformation lies in the welcome that is in the heart of God for you.



Like the wayward son, when you begin to move towards him, he runs towards you in welcome, a welcome that is way beyond what you expect, or feel that you deserve and he says, "You belong to me, you are mine, chosen and precious in my sight and I love you." There is no condemnation as you come, just celebration in Heaven that you have come home.

The way that Jesus models welcome gives us some vital clues as to how to be a welcoming church. You see, so often we, and the church in general don't get this, and the way that we welcome others is completely back to front.

What we tend to model to those who come amongst us is this.....

Firstly we want you to believe, then we want to see proof of this by your behaviour and then you can belong in our church. **Believe, Behave, Belong** is often the way we want it to be.

What do we see in the heart of God? What do we see modelled in the life of Jesus? The exact opposite.

Firstly you belong, then comes belief, then comes transformed behaviour.

Rather than our expectation of Believe first, then Behave and then you can Belong. God says, Come home to me first where you belong; as we have a relationship with each other, then your belief in me as your Loving Father will radically transform you life and your behaviour will align with God's values in ways that bring life in all it's fullness.

Belong, Believe, Behave.

Revelation 3:20 is a beautiful verse about welcome and hospitality.

²⁰ Here I am! 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.

Eating together is a huge part of getting to know someone, building a relationship and getting to know people on a deeper level. Jesus is saying, "Look, I'm standing at the door of your life, if you open up your life to me, I'll come in and build a relationship with you. Whatever the mess, I will come in. We'll have conversation together as if we were fellowshiping over food.



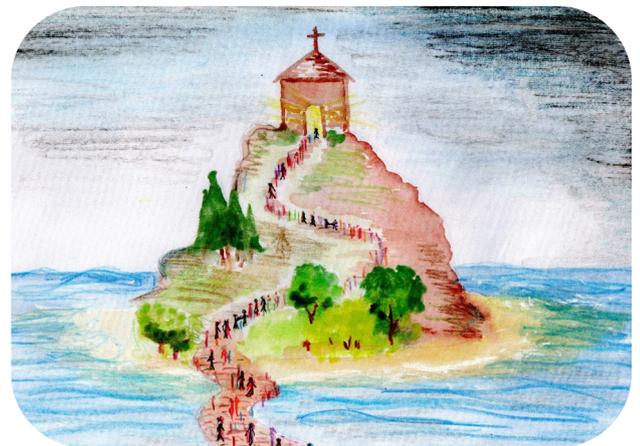
However bad your behaviour patterns, I'm more interested in welcoming you into close relationship with me and we can sort the mess out in relationship together.

I think we're starting to get the picture!

Let's finish by considering how this translates into being a welcoming church. It's actually hugely challenging... I ask myself, am I ready for this challenge? Are we together as CCC ready for this challenge?

Some of you may remember that a while ago, we shared a vision to be like a church on a hill that welcomed all the hurting, broken people that God brought to us. A bit like a hospital church welcoming the lost, the lonely, the outcast, children, young people, elderly, people with issues, people who don't behave and don't believe. All the people that Jesus welcomed. Some time later, the leadership team received a word given to us by a lady from a different church in town and here's a rough sketch of what she described as she shared the word which she felt God had given her for our church.

She described CCC as a church on a hill with a causeway across the sea on which many people were crossing. They were people who had lost their way, people with issues, people with baggage, hurting people, people who feel rejected and unwelcome in this world. People who's lives are chaotic. In her picture, we as a church were walking with these people and helping them up the hill to the church where we might welcome them on behalf of Jesus.



Just a couple of weeks ago, Mervyn received a word from someone who was praying with him, whom he didn't know, who had a picture as he prayed of a church on a hill.

It's already happening, there are people -even during lockdown- who are very tentatively taking the first step onto the causeway. Are we ready to welcome them as they cross the causeway, and help them up the hill to encounter Jesus, who runs to them with arms outstretched, whatever state their lives may be in, however shocking their lifestyles? Are we ready to welcome them in such a way that they feel a sense of belonging right from the outset, rather than sensing disapproval, or the pressure to believe and behave before they can be truly welcome. Do we have our own criteria which people must meet and if not, we just ignore them?

Only within the love and acceptance of God can a life be transformed. We are called by God to welcome others in the way that God has welcomed us. Are we ready to obey that call?

Let's allow God to have the final word on this theme of being a welcoming church, and it's a profound word that should shake us out of any of our set ideas about who is welcome.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'



³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25: 34 - 40

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of
The Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. Amen**