

The Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 31 September 2023

Message: *Welcoming one another*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, community, and mystical communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

The question the authorities asked was not unexpected. The previous day Jesus had driven the money changers out of the temple. We may hear Jesus's response as evasive. However, it was common among Jewish teachers to answer a question with a question and thereby explore an issue. Teachers often worked in pairs, one conservative, one liberal. They taught through their debates with each other. Such conversations are captured in the Talmud, the oldest commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures. A Jewish friend jokes that where there are two Jews in a room there are at least three opinions.

I often wish that we, as individual churches, as a province, as a denomination, as all who are Christian, could disagree in a similar fashion, recognising all that we have in common and honouring one another as seekers of God's eternal way.

At college, every year, our pastoral groups were each sent to a church for a weekend workout. We put on a variety of activities, tailored to build up the particular church. One year I led a session, the church requested on science and religion. A good friend, we are still in the same support group, spent much of the session disagreeing with me. It was fun.

After the session, a member of the church came up to me and said "*that was brilliant, seeing two people disagree with such*

obvious friendship. We've been tearing ourselves apart as a church (the vicar hadn't mentioned that) if we could disagree as you did there wouldn't be any problem at all." The most profound moment of our entire weekend had nothing to do with our preparation, it was how we disagreed in love and friendship.

In this week's passage from the epistles, Paul calls the church to unity. We are all followers of the same Christ Jesus described in that beautiful song in the passage. There is such agreement it is used as an ecumenical profession of faith.

We are called to unity, which is not the same as uniformity. Two weeks ago, we read another Pauline passage in which he exhorted two very different groups of Christians not to judge one another. The very different Jewish teachers, paired together, had the respect to know the other was committed to seeking and following the way of God, though they obviously understood it differently. Can we do the same.

This reflects the vision of love that we long to offer the world. Sadly, what people see and hear of most is the conflict between Christians or the ways we do not reflect the love we profess is the core of our faith.

Matthew did not include the parable of the two sons to show how terrible the Chief priest were but to challenge the church of his day to live out the gospel they proclaimed. Saying something is not enough, it must be seen in our actions too. To be credible, we must walk the talk.

I see significant signs of hope in our cathedral community. There are many acts of kindness, plenty of diverse views held without the need for uniformity and with a unity around our worship together.

I have been working with the vestry to produce a vision and mission for the cathedral. We will share it over the coming months. It is a first attempt no doubt will be gently modified over time. It gives us a focus so that we can reflect on whether the things we are doing are moving us towards our vision and whether there might be other priorities in need of our attention. Hopefully, each new vestry will review it and look at what we need to be doing next.

We haven't got that far yet. Nonetheless, I am aware of some things that we are struggling to do adequately. The two to the fore for me are the pastoral care we give and the welcome we offer as a worshiping community. To those of you who have not received the care we would hope or the welcome we would wish, I apologise profoundly.

As a clergy team, we are aware of some of the gaps. We are exploring ways of being more effective in our ministry. There is always more than we can do but failing in self-care is also not going to help anyone. One solution would be to have more clergy, which we cannot afford. It also doesn't fit with the gospel. All of us are called to live out our faith.

Pastoral care and welcoming is the life blood of any church that is going to thrive and survive. It is not the only component, it needs to be held in check with compassion for ourselves and selfcare, an integral part of the ministry of Christ. Christ too recognised the need to rest and to be away from others.

As a church community we hope that we will get to know one another well. By human nature, we naturally gravitate to the same pew and the same group of people each week. We

spend time here together and many of us socialise with many of the same people too. It builds strong bonds of friendship and love, that invincible and unending goodwill that is at the heart of what we believe.

There is however a dark side to being a friendly church. If you are new, it can be very hard to feel welcome in a church where everyone already knows everyone else or at least has their own group of friends.

We've had a bit of a slip up as a clergy team, the new member forms were not being passed on to us. So, if you are one of the people who joined in the last year and wondered why no member of clergy has come to visit you, as promised on the form, I apologise. Please, let us know if you would like us to visit, which goes for everyone, new and old alike.

In our diversity, not all of us will be good at talking to new comers and visitors. We need those who are to exercise their gift and ministry and to help those who are not. You may even want to collaborate on this, as some people are better at remembering names and faces than others and the two gifts don't always go together.

That said, even to the most talented recaller of names and faces contemporary churches are challenging. There are people who are a member of our church who are only able to attend once a month or even less often. It makes us worry we might offend by asking if someone is new. Of course there should be no worry, all of us should respond with delight at someone welcoming us, even if we suspect we should be the one doing the welcoming. We need to show graciousness to one another, look out for one another, and look out for the

stranger as a matter of priority. It takes work but it is our calling and it becomes easier to be a welcoming congregation.

Only easier, we will never get it right for everyone. For some people, this church will not fit with what they need. However, I have already seen the worship we offer inspire a wide range of people. Together we can make them welcome.

In a town which had two contrasting parishes, I enjoyed asking people why they'd joined the church they had. It was always where they had felt welcome, interestingly most had tried both churches. It is an obviously biased sample as I don't know how many people hadn't felt welcome at either.

The welcome starts at the door as they come in. Even finding a seat can be intimidating. Will I be sitting somewhere I shouldn't. Sadly, I know at least one newcomer did get told they were sitting in someone else's pew. We need the grace to change. Our response should be to sit near them and make sure they are able to follow the service and invite them to coffee after the service or introduce them to others.

A welcome is a two way interaction. If a person hasn't felt at ease with our worship, they won't be predisposed to any further welcome no matter how good it is. We should be sensitive to that. However, when people loiter around at coffee, they are clearly looking to be welcomed. We need the eyes to see them and the courage to act.

As we exchange the peace today, be brave, talk to someone you don't know, even if you recognise them and think I really should know their name, be brave ask their name. At coffee today, talk to someone you don't know. Continue to build our community through love care and compassion for friend

and stranger alike. Welcoming and connecting is the life blood of our community and, as we connect, so we will care. Amen. Amen. Amen.