

Come as you are

A question: when was the last time you had an invitation to a party or a meal at a friend's house; or something altogether grander - a wedding or a garden party at Buckingham Palace?

Well, if you read last month's magazine you will know that Wendy and David Dyke had the joy, delight and privilege of the latter. What excitement there must have been in the Dyke household when that invitation dropped on the mat. What thought had to go into getting ready for the big day on July 7th. As Wendy wrote: "The planning preparations began a long time ago! What should I wear? How should we travel? Who will look after the dog!"

When you get an invitation to something special, you need preparation time to get your head (and your wardrobe) around the event.

This month we are planning for a special service at St Hilda's. On September 27th we will be taking part in the national initiative called **Back to Church Sunday**. The idea is that we each take special care to invite a friend, neighbour or member of the family to St Hilda's.

It is an invitation with a difference. No need to dress up, necessarily. No need to be someone you are not. No need to hide behind a façade, pretend to be someone you are not. Just **come as you are**.

Come as you are. Now there's a scary thought. Come as you are - what warts and all? Yes, the invitation of Christ is always, and only, come as you are. Then, and only then, when we come as we are, do we find that in Christ's welcome lies a deeper and transforming invitation. 'Come as you are to follow me,' Christ says. 'And in the following you will be changed.' Part of that change comes as we realise we are in fact turning for home. For repentance is about a home-coming. Repentance is not about a guilt-ridden response to finger-pointing judgment. It is about turning for home. It is not about trying to be someone we are not. It is about turning for home, knowing first how we have a welcome full of joy and acceptance and celebration awaiting us.

The thing is, most of us - me included - think that to come into Church or to approach God requires us first somehow earn our place in His presence. The Gospels tell a different story. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel perhaps reminds me more than any other of Jesus' stories how the Father's welcome is assured, if I will just turn and run back home. But the other side of that story is the lack of welcome given by the older brother, the one who has, in his mind, never left home, never left the father's side and always stuck to the task. Sometimes those prodigals who want to turn for home don't dare darken the door because they are put off by the elder brother's lack of welcome. The elder brother somehow blocks out sight of the welcome of the father.

To help us think of the impact this parable has for us as a church community, we shall be studying the parable together over the first three Sundays of September. On September 6th, the sermon will consider the Home-coming Prodigal. On the September 13th we shall

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look at the Harsh Older Brother. And finally, the week before Back to Church Sunday, we'll celebrate the Welcome of the Father.

One of the most wonderful hymns that expresses the sense of invitation and welcome and home-coming is found at 308 in Common Praise:

*Just as I am, without one plea
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.*

Charlotte Elliott, the author of this favourite of mine, wrote it in 1834. She was an invalid, staying at her brother's house in Brighton, where he was a vicar. Ill health had beset her, to the extent that she felt she was just totally useless to God (see how she also had a need to somehow 'earn' her place in God's presence). Anyhow, the story goes that the night before a big fundraising bazaar was due to be held she was kept awake by the thought of her apparent uselessness. The next day, the troubles of the night came back upon her with such force that she felt they had to be conquered by the grace of God. According to the account of a family friend: "She gathered up in her soul the grand certainties, not of her emotions, but of her salvation: her Lord; His power: His promise." And so, in verse, she reminded herself of the Gospel of pardon, peace and heaven and that she was accepted in Jesus, "Just as I am".

The invitation to our friends, neighbours, work colleagues or family to come 'just as you are' is close to the heart of Jesus. May it please Him that as we continue to open our doors to all-comers, His love will be free to break every barrier down and that all-comers will find in St Hilda's space of grace a place of welcome, pardon, cleansing and relief. In fact, that they will find the very presence of God.

So let's get inviting.....!