

*Proper 17 C: Jeremiah 2.4-13; Hebrews 13.1-8,15-16; Luke 14.1,7-14*

A few weeks ago, Norwich Cathedral hit the headlines for putting a full size helter-skelter in its naïve during the summer. In response, someone suggested that we install a roller coaster here at St John's. And while I was away on holiday I was sent a picture of a church with a swimming pool in it. The caption read something like, it's surprising what you can get done when the vicar is away.

Norwich's helter-skelter has prompted a discussion about what is and what is not appropriate in a place of worship. We tend to think of churches as places of quiet contemplation which they should be. But they are also places of encounter. Of community and even fun. Until the Victorians introduced pews, many churches were the main indoor community spaces and were the setting for plays, feasts and markets.

In the next few months we will be thinking about the future of this space and how it can best serve the needs of Ranmoor. I don't think we will be installing a helter-skelter, roller coaster or swimming pool but you never know. How can we make people feel more welcome in this amazing space? St John's is very beautiful but it can also be an intimidating space to come into. How can we help people to feel at home and have a sense of belonging here? How can we make sure that the church is used by more people at more times during the week? These are some of the challenges that Edward our new architect will be helping us to address in the coming months.

But welcome is not just about buildings or fairground attractions. It is fundamentally about people. And if we want St John's to attract more people and really serve this community then we need to have a culture of welcome. I hesitate to talk about this when we have an visitors because inevitably they get mobbed after the service. Everyone is falling over themselves to welcome them and engage them in conversation. But we do need to think about our welcome. Every church thinks that it is welcoming. And we're not bad. But I've heard from a number of visitors who said that when they came to St John's no one spoke to them. We have so much to offer but we don't always make newcomers as welcome as we should. We let them slip away. We are too busy catching up with our friends or doing church business. We think it's someone else's job. That it's the vicar's job. Which it is. But if someone else is telling me about their haemorrhoid operation after the service it's very easy for a visitor to slip out behind them. So I need your help. I need everyone to look out for newcomers. To say hello. To help them with the service. And especially to make children welcome.

Welcome is at the heart of at least two of our readings today. The letter to the Hebrews puts it bluntly. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Ten days ago, when I was on holiday, I got a message from the Bishop saying he would be coming to church last Sunday. To the 10.30. I thought I'd better pass this on to Malcom and Alison so I sent them a text. In the end the Bishop came to Matins at 9.30 which was a bit of a surprise but Alison did a great job. Of course you shouldn't treat bishops any different to any other visitors but it was a reminder that you don't know who might turn up at St John's and that we need to make all of our visitors welcome.

When the writer of Hebrews talked about entertaining angels he or she was referring back to the Book of Genesis and the story of Abram who was visited by three angels in disguise at the oaks of Mamre. They came with an important message. That his wife Sarai was to bear a son. Abram could have let them pass by but instead he brought them cakes, veal, curds and milk and set them before his guests. And he was blessed for his hospitality. Later, the angels went on to visit Abram's nephew, Lot, in Sodom and Gomorrah. There they were not made welcome and those cities were destroyed as a punishment. We are blessed when we welcome others. Those we welcome may have something to teach us or give us.

In our Gospel, Jesus has some advice for both guests and hosts. If we are guests, he recommends that we observe a certain humility. A few years ago I spent some time in Abu Dhabi as part of a sabbatical. The chaplain there, Andrew Thompson, took me to an audience with one of the rulers. And it was a bit like some of those new clips you see in the television. The ruler sat at the far end of the room and then down both sides there were seats where guests waited to speak to him. And while I was sitting there I was reminded of today's Gospel. The nearer you sat to the ruler, the more important you were. Andrew, the chaplain, wisely observed Jesus' instructions and we sat quite near the door. But it wasn't long before we were ushered forward to sit nearer the ruler so that we could speak to him. Occasionally, people who were up the top end were asked to move

down and make room for others which was a little embarrassing. It was just like today's Gospel. It is better to start off lower down in the pecking order and be raised up than to take the best seat and be asked to move down. More fundamentally, we are called to live lives of humility, following the example of Jesus who was born in a stable and who washed the feet of his disciples.

Jesus' advice for hosts is that they shouldn't just invite their friends, relatives and neighbours, the people who could afford to repay their hospitality. Instead they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. People who could not repay their hospitality. And this says something important about the hospitality of the church. It is not just for people like us. For our friends and neighbours. For the educated, the respectable and the solvent. The church is for everyone and is called to reflect the overwhelming hospitality of God. One of the amazing things about the church is that it is the place where princes and paupers, young and old, able-bodied and disabled rub shoulders are made welcome at the Lord's table. All have a place here. This is a church for everyone. And that is why our welcome is so important. Not just so that we can grow the church. Not just to get bums on seats. But because welcome is at the very heart of the Gospel. It is fundamental to the good news. Amen.