

The living Church includes

[Deuteronomy 16:13-15](#) [Revelation 14:6-7](#) | 9th July 2017

Here is a theme which might be important as we think about who we are being called to be as a church. It comes from a long-term study in the Church of England and a recent survey of flourishing congregations in Scotland.

This key idea is that church - or, rather, everyone who makes up 'church' - makes room for everyone. Church fellowships are to be generously inclusive, not exclusive. Everyone in the fellowship works to include newcomers into the life of the Church, paying especial attention to those who are younger or who have special requirements so that all are helped to belong, to contribute and be nurtured in their faith. Those who are enquiring about faith are encouraged to explore and experience faith in Christ; those who believe a bit or have some commitment are enabled to go further, usually by belonging together with others. The combination of different social and ethnic backgrounds, mental and physical abilities, and ages, are all seen as strengths.

This is not some modern fashionable view of church life. It is there in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New. Deuteronomy contains many now less relevant rules but some are deeply and radically applicable today. The Feast of Tabernacles was a festival (long before these were must-attend summer events) connected with a harvest. The tradition was that, for a week, people would live in leaf-covered temporary shelters

(perhaps like glamping before it, too, became fashionable).

What's important for today's idea is who should take part. It's no surprise that the adults of Israel should be present. But so should sons and daughters: they belong, too. And what about the servants? Well, they should take part, and not just serve food and clear up. And so should immigrants from other nations. And the priests. And also those who stand in need of special care, and don't usually have anyone looking out for them. Those without the protection of and provision by male heads of families, the fatherless and widows, are all included.



There would have been no-one who didn't fall into one of those categories. Here's a Hebrew harvest celebration for the world.

And then, much later but really describing things as God presently intends them to be, is Revelation. The everlasting Good News is not for a favoured few, but is for all people, everywhere. Every nation, tribe, language and people has a right to hear about God's love in Jesus, and has a right to belong among God's people. There is nothing so international as the biblically-rooted church of Christ. We talked about this last Monday in our Bible Study and were encouraged to think that God's love might just be as deep and wide as we sometimes sing, and

be much more inclusive than we imagine.

But here's the problem. This is fine in theory, but hard to put into practice. I do not wish to be unduly political, but I'm a preacher and therefore can't in all conscience avoid politics. I see in our world all sorts of tendencies not to welcome; indeed, instead to partition, wall off, exclude, break away from, and prevent arrival.

And I cannot but comment on the news report this week suggesting that, swamped by the numbers of migrants fleeing north Africa, the Italian authorities may prohibit from docking in Italy's ports rescue vessels laden with desperate people saved that day from flimsy craft. There needs to be a continent-wide response and I suspect the UK needs to play more of a part than it has. Read in the light of Deuteronomy's instruction to include, contemporary responses to migration fall far short.

So the first problem is that we have a tendency against inclusion. We need to recognise and address that.

The second problem is more subtle and goes like this: If all are included it doesn't really matter what you do, because if later or sooner, if you want to join you'll be allowed in. One consequence of this may be to breed indifference. One problem many inclusive churches face is that they cannot so readily engender commitment.

Why wouldn't we go on the world's errands with swift-winged zeal (it is, after all, a wonderful world full of things

which sparkle and attract and promise all sorts of riches) and labour up God's holy hill with weary feet and slow? After all, in the end we'll be warmly welcomed anyway?

So you'll see outside major railway stations today, in rain and sunshine, volunteers from another faith group all too ready to share their views. They stand there because in their thinking a limited number only will belong, and they want to be among that number. The welcoming, free, more liberal institutional Church of Scotland makes little effort to bring others in, apart from opening its doors. At the same time, if not directly as a consequence, it is seeing the Scottish population drift away from it as never before. The challenge is to be so committed to an inclusive Christianity and a welcoming Christ that you'll actually invest your effort, time, attention and money in it.

We need to be a bit counter-cultural and see our faith informing a commitment to being inclusive. We need to work hard

at accommodating, at welcoming, not merely superficially or for the first visit, but permanently. Do we keep knowledge of what's what amongst a small group of those in the know? Do we restrict office-holders to those we can trust because we've known them for years? How do we deal with different views? Being inclusive doesn't mean we all think the same about everything, and welcoming others doesn't mean that anything goes. We need to be good at negotiating meaning and understandings. And that demands we don't walk away from being inclusive, particularly when it becomes more challenging.

It may also mean we redouble our efforts to work for a more inclusive world, a world where understanding overcomes suspicion, hospitality fosters helpful relations, where faith is expressed enthusiastically and generally from a place of love and is not inspired by fear.

There is much to which we can be committed. Or we could

simply walk away. Yet the challenge of the faithful of earlier generations is to become more devoted rather than depart. The Hebrews were commanded by God to be joyful; the instruction in Revelation is more terrifying but worship is to be given to the God who has made all things, including us, and who takes to do with us. This is no far-off and distant God, but rather a God who looks for our company - our cheerful, enthusiastic company. And we cannot all come to God without coming to God together. In a world which tends to compartmentalise and individualise, where separation outflanks cohesion, the Gospel offers a refreshingly different message. Let's stick together, welcome others together, here; let's work for unity expressed in diversity, and let's aim to overcome barriers of all sorts which keep people apart. It's what a seeking, reconciling, faithful God would have us do.