

## Rector's Letter June 2018

Dear Friends,

I know it's only a couple of weeks since I last wrote, but there's some other thoughts I would like to share with you now.

June 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> has been designated as 'The National Weekend of Invitation'. (This replaces the initiative 'Back to Church Sunday', which operated for several years, and which you may have heard of or even taken part in.) Back to Church Sunday had a measurable effect on boosting congregations, but in the end has been replaced because its very title implied that only those who had been churchgoers previously were of interest. There are other people, too, who are open to invitation! I would like us to take part in the Weekend of Invitation in a small way, by each of us trying to invite someone – friend, family, neighbour, or just someone you chat to in the community, to join you in church on that day. It could be at either service.

The services will be our normal ones, though I might at 10 am invite one or two people from the congregation to speak *very briefly* about what brings them to church (personal stories are always engaging than a list of theoretical reasons why this is a good thing). There will be no 'altar call' or hard sell – just St Mary's welcoming and worshipping.

### *Why invite someone?*

If you enjoy church, and find it 'does you good', why shouldn't other people too? There have been several recent surveys among the general population about church, and they've shown that there are an awful lot of people out there who would be interested in going to church – but they're just waiting to be invited! You probably know some of them. Between this Sunday and the weekend, why don't you include in your prayers a request that God will show you the right person, and give you the right opportunity. It might be that on the back of Michael Curry's sermon at the royal wedding there may be more opportunities. Lots of people were intrigued by it.

But what if they say 'no'? Lots of us don't do things because we fear failure. But look at it another way: actually it's a 'success' if we've invited someone, whether or not they said 'yes', or showed up. Why a success? –because we've been faithful. That's what God wants primarily, or faithfulness. And something, more:" we may have had to be quite brave to do it (rather like some of us feel brave when we do Christian Aid collecting – and yet we do it, even though we're afraid that people will say 'no', and the results are usually better than we'd expected!) So, when we voice that invitation, God is just as interested in what's happening in us as in what the immediate result is for the person we speak to. (And note – I say 'immediate' result: friendly invitations sometimes bear fruit later.)

Which leads me on to the last point: in the end, it's God who does the inviting. He's been working people's lives long before we get involved. We might just have the privilege of being an important part in that story of helping someone over the threshold.

So why not offer an invitation? It can't do any harm!

*And what about the welcome people get?*

We like to think we're a welcoming church, and I've certainly seen some outstanding evidence of that. But nearly every church thinks it's welcoming, yet sometimes people report that they didn't feel welcomed, even in St Mary's. Sometimes we mistake friendly conversation with people who are already our friends for being 'welcoming'. This matters at both our services, 8 am and 10 am. The friendly smile of the sidespeople, who are ready with service sheets and hymnbooks, so they don't have to turn their backs to newcomers to get them; the unthreatening greeting 'It's good to see you. Have you been here before?' Someone taking the initiative to say, 'Are you familiar with the service we use? May I sit with you, or are you more comfortable sitting by yourself?' ; and later, 'I'm going over to coffee, would you like to come with me?' – all these things help. The sidespeople can't do all of this. It might be that more of our regular church members could intentionally sit a bit further back in the church if they're not involved in the music, so as to notice new people who join us, and gently take some of these initiatives. The essential thing is picking up the signals, so that people walking through the door don't feel overwhelmed, but do feel noticed and valued!

All this will be important if people respond to our in two weeks' time – though I would hope that as many inviters as possible would take special responsibility for looking after their invitees. But, looking further forward, it may be that before Christmas, as we get ready to 'welcome Christ again', and welcome lots of visitors at special services everybody in the church could spend some time reflecting on the quality of our welcome, not just when someone walks through the door, but further down the line. There are some very good courses about welcome available, and I'm looking into the feasibility of using one of them as our Advent Course this year.

But, in the meantime, I commend to your prayers and action the forthcoming 'Sunday of Invitation' on June 17<sup>th</sup>.

Yours as ever,  
Maggie.