

Inviting others Luke 14:15 to 24 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen

In this series of four sermons on a mission shaped church we have had a session on “A vision for mission”, “Becoming a mission shaped church”, “A mission strategy” and now “Inviting others”.

In the third of our four sermons “A mission strategy”, we heard about personal mission to our family, friends and people we come into contact with, this is a vital and important part of missionary work.

My children are Christians as a result of Jill and my missionary work with them, and I'm pleased to say that they are bringing my grandchildren up as Christians; and I'm sure that story can be repeated by many of us here today.

Missionary work in families is vitally important, but don't be alarmed if as teenagers and young people they stop going to church, I did precisely that, but the foundations had been laid.

But today I'm going to speak more about the church as a corporate body and the missionary work that can be done as a church

The Bible reading in support of ‘inviting others’ is Luke 14:15 to 24, the parable of the banquet.

There are several layers to the parable of the banquet, but I want to just mention three of them.

The first I want to mention is probably the most obvious one.

Jesus in his ministry around Galilee and the surrounding countryside was all the time inviting his fellow countrymen to God's banquet.

Indeed Jesus' ministry of inviting people to his banquet has never stopped, he is still inviting people to God's banquet today, which for us here on earth, who have accepted Christ as Lord, is the Eucharist, which we will be celebrating in a moment with our Lord who is here with us in Spirit.

We know from our reading from Luke's gospel that for many reasons his fellow countrymen couldn't or wouldn't come to his banquet, so instead he decided to invite other people, and it is this second aspect of Jesus inviting others that is relevant to us today.

The second point I want to make is that Jesus used every available opportunity to speak about, and demonstrate, the Kingdom of Heaven to everyone he came into contact with, and a dinner party would be one such opportunity that he would certainly have used.

The third point, which is the one I want to talk most about, is that as Christians who have accepted his invitation to his banquet, we have been given clear instructions by Jesus in verse 23 of our gospel reading to go out into the roads and lanes in his name, and compel people to come in so that Jesus' house may be filled.

This command to bring people in to the Kingdom of God has been a feature in two of the last three sermons on mission, and is the main feature of this one.

From that it should be obvious to us that the true purpose of God's church is not to be a club for Christians to come to but a place where Christians can grow in faith and then go out into the community and in Christ's name invite more people into God's banquet.

In Matthew 9:37 which supported the first sermon we read, "Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest'".

In Luke 24:47 which supported the second sermon we read, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations".

And of course this sermon where we have already heard in Luke 14 verse 23, that we are to go out to the roads and lanes and compel people to come in. Overwhelming evidence that we are to be a mission shaped church.

Now in the two thousand years since Jesus spoke those words of the parable to go out and compel people to come in, many things have changed, not the least of which is that we do not live in the Middle East.

So while the principle of inviting people to the banquet, which Jesus outlined is still relevant and is still the core task of his church, it has to be modified in the light of our culture and of the situation in our country today, which is very affluent with many other worldly attractions which we all enjoy.

My sermon title is 'inviting others', and if you say it quick enough then it seems a very simple thing to do, and if all of us just invited one extra person to church to worship God we would, at a stroke, double our congregation.

Job done, all we have to do now is to be prepared for the huge influx of people.

However, I don't think it will happen, the problem is more complex than that, in fact if we got one extra person from such an invitation I would be surprised.

If a person does not normally go to church except for the occasional wedding, baptism or funeral they aren't going to be particularly impressed with our invitation to come to church to worship God.

So the question is how do we invite others, how do we get along side non Christians, how do we compete with the worldly attractions which are all around us.

The parable of the banquet is about inviting people to a dinner and although Jesus said that some of those he asked didn't come nevertheless in the end he did have a full house.

It is what we are inviting people too which is the key to how many will take up the invitation. So if we were to invite people to a meal I'm sure we would have more success.

So it seems that our invitation to come to church needs to be something more than an invitation to come to the 8 or 9.30 service to worship God, whether or not you add the rider, that they would enjoy it.

Some years ago now we ran Alpha courses here at St Michael's. If my memory serves me correctly we had about 150 people through the courses and possibly up to 50 or so people from our congregation, organising future courses, agreeing to produce meals and generally running the courses.

Now before we move on I just want to make a comment about the 50 or so people who were helping and running the courses.

All 50 or so were all doing missionary work. Now before the courses started very few people I'm sure would have thought that we had any missionary workers at St Michael's let alone 50 or so.

But what made missionary work possible was that we produced a good meal, we worked together in small teams, and we were delivering a well structured course.

In Luke 10 Jesus sent out the 72 in teams of two, it is much easier to work in teams rather than on your own.

Missionary work is not something that only other churches can do, we can do it as well. Not all the people who came became Christians, but many did and we certainly sowed the seeds of faith in many others

But just as importantly many Christians who came, including me, our faith was strengthened not only by taking the course, but also by delivering the course.

The reason Alpha courses were, and are, so popular, now world wide, is that they start with an invitation to a meal, a formula, which is more likely to attract people than an invitation to a church service, and indeed one that Jesus used as recorded in our reading today.

The meal of course was primarily there to get people in, because it was then that the people running the course could concentrate on speaking about Jesus' life, his death and resurrection.

It was also an opportunity to say how much Christianity had affected our lives while at the same time demonstrating that the Christian community of forgiveness and love is also very attractive and can easily compete for our time.

When we do speak to people we must have time to put across to them that Christianity is just as attractive as any worldly attractions which are available every day.

We need to get along side people and to gain their trust and confidence before we can begin to tell them about the Good News of Christ.

The Alpha formula, with it's meal and opportunity to get to know people socially, and with it's opportunity to speak to people about our Christian faith is the same formula that Jesus would certainly have used as demonstrated in our gospel reading.

What ever we call this formula, which enables us to get along side non Christians, and to hold their attention long enough to convert them to Christianity, or long enough to awaken a desire to know more, is not a thing which will be done by a few, it is a thing that will have to be done by many of us, because there is a considerable commitment when we send out invitations to a meal.

We will have to make fundamental changes if we are to become a mission shaped church which is outward looking, which exists for the community it serves, which actively gets along side people so that it can spread the gospel of Christ, and which in doing so recruits others enabling us to speak to even more people.

This fundamental change has to start now, and everyone, can help in the process by praying for guidance as we try to make this big step to become more effective as a mission shaped church, and if anyone would like to start or join a prayer group in support of mission I would be pleased to join in.

As we sit let us pray,

Gracious God,

we thank you that you have brought us to know and recognise you through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you for those who shared the gospel of Jesus with us.

We ask that in turn we may pass the Good News on to others.

Give us confidence to speak of you, sensitivity to walk with others on their journey, and love to inspire us to reach out to others.

Most of all, give us a passion to see your Kingdom come, that we might take risky steps to be your witnesses to your world.

Through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen