

Sermon Notes 22nd February 2026

Welcome

Genesis 18 v 1-10 and Matthew 25 v 34-40

The first of our Lent season sermons. All based on the five core values we have identified in how we should reflect God's Vision for St Paul's church and its fellowship as we determine the detail of our practical priorities over the coming years.

Today talking about 'Welcoming', the others in the next weeks being: Caring, Encouraging, Making Christ Known and finally the core of the core values that we will be 'Reflecting Christ' in all that we do.

But what better way to start the subject of 'welcoming' than on the day we welcome Ashton, his family and friends on the day of his baptism. Baptism is so much about 'welcoming'. As a fellowship we use that big statement of welcome in the service.

There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Ashton, by one spirit we are all baptised into one body - We welcome you into the fellowship of faith, we are children of the same heavenly father, we welcome you.

This is all about the joining the fellowship of believers, the body of Christ in the world, and it really is great that we can joyfully celebrate the commitments you and we have made to be part of that fellowship.

'BUT', Is our 'welcome' only to those who chose to join the fellowship, to those who have made the commitment to a journey of faith in Christ, to those who think and look like us, to those who won't challenge us in how we understand our faith or how we practise it. Is this a welcome to those who join 'our' club.

Is our welcome limited to being a friendly, smiling face as you come through the door and having a nice chat after the service over a cup of coffee. First impressions are really important and set the scene for what might follow - so our Welcome Team do a very important job, but a true welcome goes well beyond the initial encounter and runs so much deeper.

St Paul's has quite rightly always regarded itself and I think we are well regarded as a 'welcoming' church – something to be really positive about, but it is still worth working through firstly '**who**' are we called to welcome and

secondly 'how' we are meant to welcome. Otherwise we can be complacent. So this morning let's consider these two points. **Who** do we welcome and **how** do we welcome.

Which brings me to the 'prop' I nearly always have for a sermon. This time it's a pair of scruffy jeans. Why a pair of jeans? Please permit me to tell you a personal story. Back in the mid 80's, as a young man I was posted to Australia for work. A few years previously I had become a Christian and this time in Australia was a formative period of moving on from being a new Christian to one finding a role within the church. For three consecutive nights out of the blue I had a dream of going to a church where I was welcomed at the entrance by two besuited men in front of the internal doors giving access to the church – a bit like the ones we have got actually. The doors were closed. The two men would not let me enter the church for the service because I was wearing jeans and not being reverent to God by doing so. Despite my protestations, my entry was not allowed because I wore jeans - and in the end I told them that I was going and that I was shaking the dust of my shoes as I went – not a bad reference in a dream to the text in **Matthew 10:14** (also Mark 6:11, Luke 9:5), instructing his disciples to leave, move on, and not carry the burden of rejection.

Ever since, at the core of working out my faith has been a belief that church and church fellowship should be open to everyone and never have closed doors, literal or relational, or have any social hierarchy of wealth or anything else.

For a bit of homework, have a look at the passage in the letter from James in chapter 2 where he describes how we should never show favouritism by wealth or looks ...and look at Galatians chapter 3 where Paul in his letter stresses our equality before God, neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, neither male nor female. Might be extroverts or introverts, bold or fragile, prickly or passive. We should not judge, as we are all different but we are all loved by God.

So it was delightful and scriptural when the PCC added a couple of explanatory descriptions to the core value of 'welcome'- they were the words 'everyone' and 'non-judgemental'. There are people in this church today, those who will walk in into it tomorrow and in the months and years ahead, who may wonder why they are here, with perhaps no faith or perhaps not sure what their faith is, who may feel as out of place in a church, as I would in a betting shop; but they may be looking for a supportive community when feeling rejected or

under pressure or wanting to share their happiness and good fortune with others – or just prompted by God to read the Scriptures and enter our doors.

God does have a sense of humour sometimes in who he brings. Homeless people in rebuilt churches, octogenarian drummers in answer to prayer for a percussionist. Both becoming central parts of their fellowships. Expect the unexpected!

So what is God's vision for St Paul's? That we welcome everyone non-judgementally, as per his guidance in the second lesson read to us today. That we behave to everyone as if we are in the company of Christ himself, that we welcome people to this place as if each were Christ himself, giving the hungry something to eat, the thirsty something to drink, the naked some clothes, the stranger invited into companionship, the sick to be looked after and the prisoner visited.

Lord when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick in prison or in prison and did not help you? He will reply I tell you the truth, whatever you did not for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did not for me.

So we are straying from the first question of 'who' we welcome - into the 'How' and for this we can turn to our first reading from Genesis of the three strangers who turned up at Abraham's door in the very inconvenient heat of the day. No air conditioning in those days except the chance of a bit of a breeze in the shade of the door of your tent. Now Abraham had just been chosen by God to be the father of his chosen people, so you would have thought he might have recognised God, but he didn't - he addressed him as lord without a capital L, so he was welcoming him as a person of worth, not knowingly as God. These strangers passing by were given worth. Abraham rises above the inconvenience of the moment and makes practical provision for them with water to drink and to wash their feet (a bit of cultural context there) and enables them to rest under the shade of the tree. And he makes arrangements for them to eat – not just any old food but the best he can make available or (second prop: M&S cake). This is not just food; it's M&S food). He gave them more than he needed to; it was sacrificial giving. It was more than the minimum; he was generous. And that's so important for us to remember. Back to reality of centuries before Christ, Abraham as a typical bloke he gets his wife to the work of preparing the meal. As an aside, always be careful about the contextual content of the Bible. I really doubt this is a biblical instruction for a wife to prepare the food whilst

the bloke does all the talking. I wouldn't dare make such a suggestion. In fairness though, he just continued his hospitality by standing near them whilst they ate. He retained his interest and care for them.

What we see here is a welcome that is as generous as it is unconditional and therefore it mirrors the exhortation to us in St Paul's letter to the Hebrews (13.2). 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it'.

There was a good purpose for this, because in offering a welcome that is both unconditional and generous, we are mirroring exactly how Christ welcomes us, with all our imperfections and shortcomings, into his family. At the entrance path to our church is the stone from our 150th anniversary. That stone is a constant reminder of Paul's exhortation in his letter to the Romans, chapter 15 'Welcome one another therefore, as Christ welcomes you, to the glory of God.'

A reminder for us all as we walk up the path as we welcome those who walk before, after and with us.

So if I can sum up how we reflect Christ in the welcome we give in this place and fellowship.

Our welcome is in many ways counter-cultural, as we build a community of grace in a very divided world. It has to be distinctive in its unconditionality and generosity of spirit. It goes beyond politeness, to an active, sacrificial and transformative hospitality - drawing people to the heart of Christ's community. The people we welcome will bring change, challenges and treasures for us to enjoy.

Transformative for us too. The people we welcome will bring change, challenges and treasures for us to enjoy together.

So welcome – **Who?** (Jeans) – Everyone and non-judgementally.

How? (Cake) – With generosity, materially and in spirit.

So as we welcome Ashton into the family of Christ in his baptism, so we welcome here everyone, irrespective of who you are or where you are at. Know that you are loved by God and by his people at St Paul's. Amen.