

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

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Matthew 19:13-15

James 2:1-9

When James was writing his letter, he was aware that at least some Christians way back then in the first days of the church were discriminating against one group in their midst. They were giving preferential treatment to those who were used to being preferred in life and therefore were discriminating against the poor. They made a value judgement – quite possibly without even thinking about it.

When people brought their children to Jesus to have his blessing, his disciples made a value judgement about who was worthy of Jesus' time and attention, which means who was worth bothering with. And the children failed to make the cut. Jesus, of course, felt differently.

Since the days of the gospels being written, so that we could know this story about the children, and since the days which prompted James to write his letter the church has known that we are to welcome everyone, and we are not to show partiality. So that's good, isn't it? It means we have that one sorted.

I wish it did! We certainly know what we ought to do, but how good are we at really doing it? Jesus called all ages and all kinds of people. He called pharisees and tax-collectors, fishermen and agitators, people with a cause and people who never thought about life beyond their own immediate concerns. He welcomed the young and he welcomed the old. They weren't all nice people. They didn't have unblemished pasts or presents.

A new favourite hymn in many churches – and we sing it a fair bit here too – is Marty Haugen's song Let us build a house where love can dwell, with its chorus All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

All are welcome, we sing, and we mean it. Or we think we do. And we have greeters at the door of our churches on Sunday morning to welcome people in. All are welcome. The writer of our hymn, Mary Haugen wanted

us to mean it. He isn't keen for just anyone to sing it. I gather that he refused to allow his hymn to be published in the hymnbook of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Now the Missouri Synod sounds like a local body, but it is in fact a whole denomination of Lutheran, not the only one, all across the States. It is a conservative denomination and it is not one which is welcoming to people who identify as homosexual or lesbian. They draw the line there, and so they cannot use the hymn. All are not welcome.

Jesus did not draw a line when he invited people. He didn't agonise over choosing the right people to come and listen to him, to hear what he was about. He didn't ask what good they would be to his cause, because the reason he called people, all people, was because of God's love for them.

He did agonise – or at least spend a night in prayer – when he chose the twelve disciples who were to take his mission forward – he wanted the right people, and they had to be a cross-section of society. But all were welcome to hear him and to speak with him. All were and are loved by God. And so many people took up that invitation that crowds of five and four thousand had to be fed. They were so numerous that not everyone could get as close as they would like – think of Zacchaeus who climbed the tree, or the woman with the haemorrhage, who had to push through the crowd to touch the hem of his garment. Tax collectors, unclean women, Roman centurions, children, people with infectious diseases – Jesus did not draw the line.

We nearly all draw the line somewhere. The disciples drew it at the idea of children being important enough to waste time on. These under12s, what did they know and how could they help the movement forward? No one listened to them (not in those days) and so why would Jesus waste valuable time on them?

The church James wrote to seems to have drawn the line at the poor. Again, how would they help the cause? They were asking for things, not offering things. A new, struggling movement needs people of power and influence to help get things going. Never mind if those same people might bring the ways of the world and the priorities of the world into the church.

I came across this attitude in a large church in Chicago, where I worked with the homeless programme. There, one of us social service team had always to be on duty with the greeters in the vestibule when there was a service, so that if any of our clients turned up, we could take them away and see to their needs. That their need and desire might be to worship with others seemed not to have dawned on the church hierarchy. That their worship might be enriched and enhanced if those from the lowest end of the social spectrum were allowed and encouraged to be part of it hadn't

been thought of – not as much the idea that they might smell or shout out. (There were, of course, honourable exceptions, but this was what the institutional policy and message was.)

We are called to be the church for all the people. Jesus invited and welcomed all kinds of people. So as you look around this morning, ask yourself – is this a cross-section of Laggan/Newtonmore/Kingussie? Are we proportionate to the youth, the elderly, the well-off and the less well-off, to the employed and unemployed, to the healthy and the less healthy? If we are not, is that just the way it is, or does it mean that over the years the church has become perceived as being less welcoming to some and more welcoming to others? Or does it mean that we are over-thinking our inviting, to the extent that we aren't inviting anyone at all?

We mean to welcome all, of course we do, but it is too easy for an inner circle of church to develop which is hard to penetrate. There are those who go to Bible study, or special services or house-groups or whatever, and those who think it is not for the likes of them. There are Kirk Sessions which nearly always choose the self-selecting method of recruiting new elders, although seeking nominations from the congregation is open to them. As you know I have been serving the central church's nomination committee and I can tell you it is very depressing to see the same names coking up time and again, and new names being rejected because no one knows them and can speak to their soundness or usefulness. And that is just within the church. It may be that there are some within the church who only want a certain amount of involvement or commitment, but it may be too that there are inner rings with it gets harder to penetrate the longer that they are allowed to exist unchallenged.

In small communities like this it may be that the church itself, the congregation that gathers here on a Sunday, is seen as an inner ring by the community: a group which is fixed and hard to break into. We don't want it to be like that, of course, but could it be that this is what happens?

Jesus took a risk when he invited all comers. If we are going to sing that all are welcome, maybe we need to think about what our welcome is really like and to take that risk as well. And maybe as we work out what our work as a church should be, and how we can reach out to others, and how we can portray the church in the community, we should think about what we do in terms of what is says about our church and our mission to reach to the parts of society that no one else thinks important.

Jesus welcomed the children, these young people who were reckoned of no account by his society and so by his disciples, and he said that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. He says this of all the people

that we might tend to overlook. He says it of the people who live alternative life-styles. He says it of the youth that hang about the streets and who sometimes look intimidating. He says it of those who have few social skills. He says it of the people with mental health issues. He says it of those who have to use the foodbank. He says it of those with whom we have had disagreements in other spheres of life, and whom we might find it hard to welcome into our church because of that. He says it of any who might be invisible to us. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. He doesn't mean that they are already living in God's kingdom, but that they are as much to be brought into it as anyone else. They are to be welcomed and invited and made at home here, not because of what they can contribute, but because God loves them and they need to know that. We all need to know that. When God called you, it was not because of what you could do for him – in the last analysis God doesn't need us to do anything for him, does he? But he calls us because he loves us. And then, because he loves us, when we are secure in his love, he tells us that we are so important to him that we can be part of his mission to the world.

But first God welcomes us and so our first duty – and it should be a delightful duty – is to welcome all and sundry, and make sure that they know that they are welcome – to church yes, but even more, welcome to God's presence. And for some people, who find the world a difficult place, the fact of welcome will mean more and the ability to know God's love will mean more than it does or can to those of us who live at ease in the world.