

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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Facing the Fear

Jonah 2:1-10

John 3:1-10

Last week we began to look at the next stage of being a church travelling into renewal, which is to begin to learn to develop a culture of invitation. It is great if we are growing in our discipleship and deepening our communion with God – great and important, but from that and while we are still doing that (because that is a relationship that never stops growing) if we want to see the church, this church renewed, we need to be inviting people into our family and God's family. The family that never adds new children is the family that dies out, after all!

Last time we looked at the comic reluctance of Jonah to do what God asked him to, and we thought about the fact that when we talk about invitation, most of us will have in mind the name of someone we think we maybe should be inviting to church or some other environment where they can hear about the love of God, but that about 90% will do nothing about it – like Jonah we would almost rather die.

We left Jonah in the belly of the fish – remember we are not worrying about the historicity of this story of Jonah, we don't care if it was a fish or a whale or if it was impossible – it is a story with a message and the message is what matters.

And in that fish, what Jonah does next is that he prays. Maybe if he had done that first this would have been a different story, but at least he does it now, offering God a prayer of thanksgiving – "I thought with that storm that God wanted to kill me, but instead God has saved my life! Thank you, God!" His prayer is a reflection on what he has gone through – the floods, the waves, the sinking into the deep water and then the salvation, unlikely and unlooked for. Jonah knows that he has not been saved because he has been faithful. So maybe he has been saved so that he can be faithful. Almost as a throwaway line towards the end of his prayer he says, "What I have vowed, I will pay." In other words, I will do what you asked me after all.

Now, I know that there are a few great inviters among us. Last month saw new families in Messy Church because they had been given an invitation, spoken, not written, and so personal. Well done that inviter. By the way I know that other families were given the same invitation, who did not come – but it is still well done that inviter! However, most of us are in that zone where we know of those whom we

might invite but we won't be doing it any time soon. Here are some of the common reasons people give about why.

My friend said no last year. Remember, we are thinking about giving an invitation, we are not going to worry too much about the responses, as these are in God's hands. If you have had a no from a friend, that was probably painful for you. But if someone declines an invitation it is because of them, because of who they are: it's not a comment on you. And the person who said no once, may have been thinking about it since, and may be ready to say yes now – or may need even more thinking time, but needs to know that you are still thinking about them. If you think of a person whom you would like to invite and then think "But they would never come!" you have made the decision for them and are not allowing them to make that decision for themselves.

Another common reason for non-inviting is something along the lines of *we have no non-church friends*. I so hope that this could not be said by anyone here. I would hate to think that this church was such a ghetto that none of us moved outside it!

Then there is the classic *That's the minister's job*. Yes, it is. One of my jobs is to invite people to come to church or to come to other places, to hear the good news of God's love. But with the best will in the world, I can't reach out personally to everyone, even in a fairly small parish like this. There are people you know better than I do, whom you are better suited to invite than I am.

Some people might say *I was never invited*. If you come from a family which has always gone to church, which has grown up passing the faith down the generations, this might be true. But this is not nearly so often the case these days, and the church will not grow if it relies on those who do not need to be invited just turning up. To invite, especially if we have never done it before, can be nerve-racking. But remember it is in inviting that we are faithful and obedient, not in getting the responses we hope for.

A real fear for some people is *What if it damages my friendship?* Maybe this is where many of us are. We don't want to rock the boat; we don't want things to change. We are glad that there is someone who wants to be our friend in the first place, even though we are Christian and therefore weird. It is an old one this. Nicodemus visited Jesus by night for fear of what his peers would do if they found out. Indeed John's gospel has several examples of people keeping quiet about their faith because they were afraid of rocking the boat.

But you know the secret of life. As Peter said to Jesus, when he asked if the twelve also wanted to turn tail and go away in fear, "Where else could we go? You have the words of eternal life!" Knowing Jesus, you know the secret of life, now and for ever. What kind of friend are you if you do not try to share this, or invite your companions to discover this for themselves?

But would you want to *invite them here?* Some people are afraid that in the entertainment age in which we live, our services are unpredictable or not full of pizzazz, or is in some other way – maybe because of who does come – not perfect.

But we can't wait until the church is perfect before we invite, because it never has been and never will be.

But the thing I hear most often is that people tell me *I am reticent*. "It's not my personality to go and pull people in off the street" I was told recently. Actually the person who said that told me what she does instead. Well done her. In fact, being invitational does not mean that we go and pull strangers in off the street – not usually, and not for most of us. It means bringing invitation into a relationship that you already have with someone.

Then there is the old classic *Religion is a private matter*. Thank you very much Mrs Thatcher, although there were many before her who articulated this heresy. Religion has never been a private matter. It has always been about the whole of life, including our public and corporate life as well as our quiet private moments. To give an invitation is not to be brash – unless brash is your style. But if we want to take the softly, softly approach to such an extent that the invitation is never given then, as we saw last time, we have in fact failed to obey God. And what matters most?

And, right at the heart of our fear – because really all of this is about us, about our fear - is the imponderable: *They might ask something about my faith that I can't answer*. Maybe even, *they will know that I am a Christian*, though I hope not. But all you are doing is giving an invitation. Last week when we read of how Nathanael was a bit scathing of Philip's invitation - "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" - Philip simply said "Come and see." Most people won't ask hard questions, but if they do, "Come and see" is always a good answer – you make no claims to be able to answer all queries, you are not setting up as a know it all. But you are inviting your friend to come to a place where directly or indirectly questions might find some answers.

Nicodemus, who didn't need an invitation, came to Jesus with his own agenda – and many of us have come in the same way, with what we thought were the important points, and which we thought were difficult to answer. And like Nicodemus, we find that Jesus is not answering what we want to talk about – in this case is Jesus a teacher sent by God – but about what he wants to address in our lives – that we can't be half hearted about our faith – it is not just a matter of signs and intellectual assent, but of a whole re-birth and new start to our lives. Your friend might have questions but invite them anyway, to discover for themselves what God might have to say to them.

When Jonah was in the belly of that impossible fish, in his prayer he remembered who God is. God is the one who hears, and the one who delivers or sets us free. Remembering who God is, is the best answer to and help for any of the excuses we like to give for not being the inviting people that Jesus wanted his disciples to be. Remembering that God does not *have* to heed us or love us or pay attention to us or help us, but the he chooses to. Remembering that we are his children beloved and cared for not because we deserve it, but because that is who God is – the one who loves to love far beyond our deserving. Remembering that

God is the one who sent his Son in love to live with us and die for us. This is the God whom we know and love and trust and follow.

When it comes to invitation, as we will see next time, when we remember who God is, we are given the confidence that when we invite, we can leave the results in God's hands. There is a lot more than just us at work here. But, like Jonah, we are invited to be a part of God's mission and to bring his invitation to our friends, colleagues or neighbours. And like Jonah, even if we have spent a life-time trying very hard not to do this, not even to think about doing this, God will pick us up, brush us down, give us a chance to think about who he is and how amazing his love for us is, and then give us another try.

"Then the Lord spoke to the fish and it spewed Jonah out onto dry land." It is not the most elegant way of arriving back at your starting place, but we are not called to be elegant, we are not called to be poised, we are called to be real and we are called to be faithful. When we are real and faithful we can be surprised by what God will do.