

Belonging Sermon

We are looking at our first value, belonging. I thought this was going to be a simple sermon to write because I have lots to say, then I realised it's a very difficult sermon because I have lots to say.

The first reading was from quite a small book in the Old Testament called Nehemiah, Nehemiah is Jewish civil servant working in a foreign land and hears that the walls of Jerusalem, the capital city and symbol of his homeland, have been destroyed. This causes him great anguish, but he has a sympathetic boss who gives him unpaid leave to go home to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. So, Nehemiah arrives and examines the problem, no walls. And gets to work inspiring and encouraging everyone. That is what happens, more or less.

I chose this story because it highlights a tension and something of a solution to that tension. It's a tension that we have in our church, it's a healthy tension that all churches should have, but it is a tension none the less. That tension is *how do we create a strong sense of belonging amongst each other, whilst at the same time welcoming those who are new?* You might feel that tension at the end of the service as you have a tea and coffee, I certainly do.

At the end of the service do you get a tea and biscuit and chat to someone you already know or a new person? I think that comes down to two important things in our church- the tension of belonging and inclusion.

I believe at the core of our being is our need for belonging. We need a place where we belong; we need our tribe. I think two of our biggest fears are loneliness and meaninglessness and **belonging** is our biggest defence against those fears. In this place we worship God, think and talk about God and this God is both singular *and* plural. One God, three parts, this is the God that we created in the image of. The trinitarian God, father or creator, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.

All the persons of the trinity **belong** together. The external works of the trinity are undivided, the stuff that God does is bound up in all three members of the trinity. The holy spirit doesn't only appear when we sing songs. The trinity is different, yet completely united. The trinity is a picture of diversity **and** belongingness. Being made in the image of God means we inherit this desire to belong. And it's in belonging that we find meaning.

Have you ever tried to clap one handed? I think that is what it is like trying to find meaning outside of belonging. We need others around us to recognise, encourage and nurture our gifts.

I was recently reading a book on the letter to the romans, in it, its two Canadian authors were lamenting the Canadian government's approach to educating the children of the indigenous people of Canada. Their solution was to cut the children off from their families and send them away to central training schools where they could acquire the habits of "white men." What happened? Well, the report says the path from those central schools to prison was a short one. These children cut off from belonging lost all sense of meaning in their lives. We need to belong to find meaning in our lives. It's as simple as that.

The tension arises when we learn that for each of us there are only two types of people in the world. **People like you**, and **People unlike you**. **People unlike you** might be people that are in a different age bracket, different physical ability, different education, different sexuality, different social background. In church we all come together, St Paul, a writer in the bible says, says there is no Greek, no jew, nor

male nor female, neither slave nor free, we are all one in Christ Jesus. in a diverse community sometimes, you will need and want your tribe. That is a normal human response. We are more likely to marry, buy from, befriend or vote for people like ourselves. And in one way, knowing and being drawn to **People like you** is fine and even useful, creating small networks of care and solidarity. Its where belonging is so important. But if all you have in your life is people like yourself, you will eventually have a problem, you only see the world through one lens.

This is the tension. **Inclusion says** you are unlike me, but I want you in my life. You are not in my tribe, **but** I know there is mutual value in sharing our lives together. I want to learn from **you** about how **you** see the world, because your view will enrich mine. **Belonging says**, I need my tribe, **Inclusion says** you are different, but I need you. Both are ok, but we must live with this tension. In the story of Nehemiah repairing the walls of Jerusalem was for the common good but people needed to protect their house, so they built the wall in front of their houses. In this church and our lives, we need to find ways to include people who are unlike us *and* foster a sense of belonging.

Our question to solve together is how do we belong to this church *and* include others? We rebuild the broken wall of Jerusalem, *and* we protect our house.

Connected to that sense of meaning that belonging nurtures is our beliefs. Our values hold equal weight, but they are in a deliberate order – this is because belonging is the most fertile ground for believing.

In the church I grew up I was given the impression that I must make disciples of those who I worked with. The way I was told to that was to first convince people of their sinfulness, then to believe that Jesus was their lord and saviour, then if these people repeated some words that I said, then they could join my church, and then in church everything else makes sense. But there is a problem, a big problem. That is nothing like how Jesus went about making disciples.

Take the 2nd reading from the Gospel. Jesus goes straight up to Levi and just says come, follow me. No sinner's prayer, no convincing, just follow me. When did Matthew believe? We don't know, but I don't think any of Jesus disciples believed much in him when he was arrested because in mark's gospel it says they (the disciples) all fled. When did all the disciples believe? They occasionally get close, before Jesus went to the cross. But I think it's clear from the bible that it was after the resurrection that the penny dropped for the disciples. But throughout Jesus's ministry they **belonged**. The first thing Jesus said to Levi, is come follow me, come belong with me, lets figure out this faith thing together. It's not just Jesus that shows us this. At the start of the year, we looked at Abraham.

What does God say to Abraham? God's promise to a wandering **Bedouin**?

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²“I will make **you** into a great **nation, not into a great man or person**. A great nation is a collective vision. Belonging is the root and fruit of Christianity.

We have a deep need to belong with God. The Incarnation, God, becoming human in the form of Jesus, is God answering our deepest need. God came in the form of Jesus and belonged with us. Our stained-glass window of the Christmas story celebrates this. But what did Jesus leave behind? No book, no individual heir to his throne, but Jesus left us the church. us.

Jesus only mentioned church twice, in Matthew, once concerning church discipline. The other...talking to the disciples Jesus says,

“But what about you? Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**” ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, **and on this rock, I will build my church.**

The church, the deepest and best example of belonging we have as humanity is based on a confession concerning the identity of Jesus, the divine saviour.

One of the things we do when we gather is we collectively reflect the image of God. When we gather as one body, our embodiment mirrors the trinitarian God. So, when we gather in person or online in the name of Jesus and do God things, by God things I mean **good** things like, build each other up, encourage one another, share life together in a meaningful way, working the gardens, serve each other or serve our community – together we are reflecting God the trinity. When we meet in the name of Jesus our unity and diversity reflect the trinitarian God.

Church fulfils two of our deepest needs, to belong and to find meaning. In church we can meet our deepest needs to belong with each other and belong with God, and in that space work out why we are here and what we believe. But it begins with belonging, because belonging is the most fruitful soil to grow the crops of belief. If you wanted to deepen your faith, deepen your relationships in church particularly with those unlike you and those who marginalised.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us that when we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, care for the sick, you are doing it to Jesus. do you want to see God? Do you want to imagine God properly? Serve the marginalised, it's the best way to do it. God has no hands but ours. Prayer, I read recently.

I'm going draw this to a close soon, but I want to finish with some personal advice. Some tips from someone who has written the many funeral sermons. in funeral sermons or eulogies, no one mentions how much money you earned, qualifications you achieved, the skills you bought to the marketplace, but you will hear whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. When I meet with the bereaved family members, they tell me about how the deceased made them feel. Those are the things that people remember and care about at the end. At the end its never about financial wealth it's about relational wealth. The depth of your belonging.

My dream is that everyone who is involved in the life of St Marks is relationally wealthy, I want St Marks to a place where everyone has a strong relational framework. That's why you will find me in the community hall on Wednesday with our toddler parents and carers, that evening I will be at our youth group, Thursday I will be at our morning café and church service, and you will find me here twice on a Sunday. I want people that use this building to be relationally wealthy. But I can't do it alone. I need you. I need you to help me continue discover my meaning to deepen my faith and help others do likewise.

Take home our pledge card, think on it pray on it, think how can you play your part in creating a place of loving acceptance? What can you do to make this church and community centre the most welcoming place in town? Belonging starts with welcome, and welcome brings joy and joy brings hope. Pray about your pledge card, let's make this place somewhere that the sense of belonging is tangible for everyone, no matter who they are, what they have done, where they are from.

Amen

