

“Bridges” and “Staircases”.

Mark 1:14 - 20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

How often do I read the bible and think - it was easy for Jesus! When he ran short of catering, he just produced more wine or bread or fish. When he didn't fancy taking the long route home, he just walked on the water! And when he wanted more followers, needed more in his group - he simply said - come, follow me - to Simon and Andrew, James and John - and they just followed!

Have you tried doing that to get people to come to church?

I mean there's room for a few more here.

Come, follow me to church. “Oh sorry, I'm busy” “sorry, I don't do religion” “sorry, I've heard bad things about the church” etc etc.

But we want to bring people in, Jesus told us - go into all the world. We want people to know the joy of knowing Jesus, we want people to feel set free from their guilt or shame, we want people to know the abundance of life spent walking God's way. We're like Willy Wonka trying to give away the chocolate factory.

But it turns out, we're pretty rubbish at it. And we have been, for hundreds of years.

The church invented special words for this activity of inviting others -

We called it mission, which is latin for sent - like we're being sent out into all the world.

Then we called it evangelism - which is greek - for good news, or bearer of good news.

Sometimes we talk about “making disciples” - which is another greek word, meaning learner or student.

Has it helped? All this using foreign languages and setting up a decade of evangelism?

Frankly no. These have become scary words, intimidating words, guilt wracking words.

Someone said - mission - I wouldn't do it to my dog.

We feel its wrong to just brow beat people - feel guilty so you can come to church and feel better!

Its not really helpful to cold call and knock on the door and say - is it well with you soul?

Perhaps because we wouldn't want someone to do it to us? Perhaps because its not very natural, or obvious. And if we're uncomfortable doing it, they are going to be uncomfortable receiving it.

So I'm going to talk about “that stuff” today - but I'm not going to use those words.

So here's a little video.

Let me draw you a picture, a model, of our parish.

There's the church - that's you and me - people who are on the electoral roll, people who give regularly, people who come regularly - more than once a year regulars! - Maybe 100 - 150 people

And then there's people who come once a year, people who will always be here at coffee mornings or churchyard clear up. People who come to Recreate, Forest Edge, Little Jim's. They come to church things, they know it's a church thing, and they don't mind. They know church people, but they're not in the church. This is the Fringe. Maybe 300 people. And then there's the rest of the community. People who do not come to any event we put on. People who do not have a neighbour who goes to church, or even know anyone who goes to church, they may not have heard of St James! And this group, in Alderholt, is about 2,500 people. For every 1 person we know, there's 5 we don't.

Why am I telling you this - because the church will grow - from the fringe. The people that already know us, will come closer and know us more. The chances of someone coming from the outer ring, to membership is very small. It doesn't happen often. So what we do in the Fringe is important.

Activities like -

Forest Edge

Vestry Group

Recreate

Knit and Natter

Friendship Club

Little Jim's

Fete

Bazaar

But also - baptism, weddings, funerals, flower arranging, churchyard helpers

And what we need to see is that each of these is like a **bridge** that people can walk across to come to church.

So let's talk about how people join church - getting them over the bridge!

When I grew up, in the punk era - people would say - I wouldn't want them in church, they can't be Christian look at their hair! Or if you watch Granchester, or remember the 50's, if someone didn't behave right - maybe they got drunk or had a baby out of wedlock - people would say "how dare they come to church".

Being a Christian, being part of the church, seemed to be about how you behaved - the clothes you wore, not swearing, being polite. That kind of thing.

People said - if you behave right, you can be part of the church.

Then things moved - you can blame Martin Luther in the 16th Century, or Billy Graham - but suddenly it seemed church was all about what you believe - believing the right thing. Up here.

So our job was to try and convince people about theology - here's 3 steps to heaven, here's the sinners prayer. Make a choice, believe in Jesus and you'll be saved.

Which in one sense is all true, but it doesn't half make getting people into church difficult!

You've got to intellectually convince them of a proposition you're not entirely sure of yourself, and what if they ask a difficult question - like suffering, or the virgin birth?!! Church became about knowing the right stuff. If you believe the right things, you're part of the church.

Now, let me tell you that there is a third way! The church is not just a group of people who believe in Jesus and the Creed, but we do. Its not just a group of people who try to live in a certain way - kind, forgiving, tolerant - but we do. We are also - a group!!

The church is a community - a gang, individuals who are part of something bigger. And I could talk all day about how deep theologically this is - God is a group of 3. God invented families - mini communities. We became tribes, adn nations - everyone wants to belong to something. Its a fundamental human desire and need.

Jesus called his disciples - created a community of men and women.

After the resurrection he called that group his body - we are the body of Christ.

The church is this community, we are chosen by God, invited by him, to be with one another.

So when we try to grow the church, or invite people over these bridges

Don't think about whether they behave right - none of us are perfect

Don't think about whether they believe the right thing - we don't' all have a degree in theology

People will join us, come over that bridge, in order to belong to the community.

Because they like us and they want to hang out with us and be our friends.

And you think - oh but Simon, it should be harder than that!

These difficult greek and latin words, its not for me, its someone else's job!

But look - this is how it works.

Someone comes along to the cafe, Forest Edge, and they make friends with Rose.

Rose says - why don't you come along to our Christmas service.

And when they come to church, they find they already know - Cathryn, and Christine and Brenda.

And then they find the remember some of the old hymns, and being in church feels comforting.

And then Rose says - why don't you come along to Mothering Sunday.

And they come again.

And maybe they start coming regularly, and maybe they've got questions or they see answers to prayer, and in church they hear the bible - for the first time in years. And maybe because of the questions they join a housgeroup, or some group the vicar's running to talk about issues.

And then they start to believe - to find out about faith.

Then maybe, their behaviour changes, but frankly I leave their behaviour up to God.

This then is our plan, to make it easy for people to come through the door.

That we have Bridges into the community, networks of friendships and relationships.

And through belonging to those, people can move from the fringe to the centre.

I think this church has a lot of bridges. Some churches have none, and they have to set up a toddler group or a cafe. But we've got those, we've got lots of bridges.

If we had more people in church we could look at where we are missing - who are we not reaching with our Bridges.
But I think if you were to add it up - there might be 500 people we reach. Which is 1/6th of Alderholt - which is amazing.

So we have the bridges, but people need a way to move across these bridges into faith. We need to make **staircases** that lead people in that journey.
Small, easy steps, that enable and support those who want to make it -
From the edges into joining the church family.

Let me give an example of a baptism

The family enquire about baptism, and they chat to Holly, they meet the vicar and the sponsor, who goes round to their house, and they have a lovely service. They do!

Then the children and families worker, Zoe, goes round and invites them to Little Jim's - on a Friday, at school. So they meet other parents, and Zoe. And it's a little community.

Then they hear about Messy Church, and there are other families going, and so they try that out.

They hear the bible, they talk about faith. They meet the whole wider church family!
Maybe they go on the rota to help with crafts. They're doing prayers, they're singing.

Then they try out Sunday Club. They come here, on a Sunday - they meet more people, they get on a tea and coffee rota - but they hear more about faith, they catch the faith from the way we love each other, the way we support charities, the way we connect with God in our worship.

And then if they want to know more, to dig deeper - then they join a house-group, or come to some course that the vicar puts on about prayer or the bible, or some thing else.

And through little steps, that all connect - they come up the staircase to belong.

Isn't that so much easier than trying to argue with someone on a doorstep?
Or hiring a big mission evangelist speaker and then hoping people turn up?

We have the bridges, the outposts of the kingdom, we just need the staircases.
And at PCC we're going to work on them - to make sure we have every step in place.
To join things up. To invite others to follow God.

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I said - very tongue in cheek - that Jesus found it easy to invite people.
But where was he, when he called the fisherman?
Was he in the synagogue? Was he doing a big rally on the mountain?

No - he'd gone to where they were - at the nets, at their boats, he went to them.
So we need to go where people are - which means going to the village hall for Messy Church.

Well done and thank you, to those who came last month.
After Remembrance Sunday, we'll be back down there again.

Mike spoke a few weeks ago, very challengingly, about what the future was, about where St James would be in 20 years time - and he said that this experiment of Messy Church on the 3rd Sunday was a leap of faith that we should all take - even if we thought - it wasn't for us. That we might be surprised. But I hope I've also shown you today why its so important as part of the staircase, of leading people deeper.

God wants to grow his church, that's his plan, and its built in.
With God all things are possible.

We are Little Giants - little in our own strength, but mighty with God.
See you on the 21st in the Village Hall - 10am - cooked breakfast!