



Do you know what excites and delights me most about our refurbished building? Is it the smart new rooms in the tower, is it the wee secret kitchen at the back of the church or perhaps it's the sophisticated sound system with all its exciting possibilities? Well actually, no. My heart sings when I see the gently sloping path (much too elegant to be called a ramp) which leads from the pavement right into church. Because, that gives out a message. You're welcome here whether you are walking, using a frame or in a wheelchair. You're welcome if you're pushing a buggy. It's one path for all. We enter this church building on equal terms. Part of our mission statement, which you'll see on our notice boards and on the front of the magazine says this 'St Anne's exists to honour God by being an open and inclusive church' and that's just as well because our readings today tell us that our God is an inclusive God.

In our first reading, from Isaiah, God declares that *foreigners* who wish to come to him will be welcome. He will bring them joy in his house, which is to be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples. He goes on to declare that he won't just *welcome* but *actively gather* people from outside the Jewish race.

In the second reading we see a Gentile woman being commended by Jesus for her faith and receiving healing for her daughter. I think Jesus is testing her faith when he says to her 'It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. In other words, 'my mission's for the Jews isn't it, not the Gentiles? But 'even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table' she says. You see she knows *instinctively* that God's mercy will extend to her. She knows she's *included*.

So let's consider this matter of inclusivity. It's a high ideal and, like all high ideals, it presents real challenges. You see, having wheelchair access and a loo for the disabled doesn't make us an inclusive church. Let me tell you a story.

My last teaching job was in an Early Years Unit in Yorkshire. It was held up to be a beacon of excellence in the local authority. Like the Nursery recently rated as outstanding by Ofsted, we didn't wrap the children up in cotton wool fearing the dangers of conkers or anything sharp. Our children were given exciting adventurous experiences. They could build their own obstacle courses using bricks planks and old crates, they could use real tools, including hammer and small saw. There were high expectations of them too. No ready mixed paint for them, they learnt to mix their own colours using powder paint. The children thrived. The staff were very convinced of the rightness of this approach and had overcome obstacles on the way to put their ideals into action.

However.. I was employed to be responsible for a small group of children within the unit who had severe learning difficulties and were functioning at a twelve to eighteen month level. I soon realised that there were times when my little gang were *not* included. They couldn't paint pictures because they hadn't yet developed the fine motor skills to mix powder paint. Activities which provided challenge for the majority placed my children in danger. Also, they *might* be persuaded to sit still on the carpet for story time but that was as far as their participation went.

We discovered that bringing in these children with their differing needs created real tension. Our Early Years Unit was commended for its 'good practice'. There was a reluctance to let go of anything which had been fought for in the past and which worked well for the mainstream children. Eventually, however, amongst other things, we *did* move the nails out of Luke's reach so that he couldn't eat them and we *did* introduce ready mixed paint so that Emily could run off three masterpieces in as many minutes, on first arriving at nursery. We also established a *separate* story time for my children, where we could work on specific targets alongside a Speech Therapist.

We had to examine our ways of doing things in the light of the needs of this small group of children. That meant *letting go* of things held dear and *introducing* things which went against the grain.

The Jewish Christians in the early church had similar struggles when they received Gentile converts into their midst. Issues that needed to be addressed included the practice of circumcision and the keeping of food laws. Were these deeply held traditions to be relaxed or would the Gentiles have to conform to Jewish ways?

If we are an inclusive church, we have to be prepared to welcome those who are 'other' than us. As we have seen there are ways of making physical adaptations to ensure that people's needs are met. However, I suggest that the real challenges and tensions will be when God brings us (and yes it is God who does the bringing) people who cannot just fit in to our way of worship, who don't speak our churchy language, who don't have a foundation of Sunday school teaching, who don't even know what the bible is, let alone what's in it. And, believe you me, there are more and more people who fit that description.

In our Early Years Unit we treasured the philosophy which we had developed about how young children learn but we discovered that to be truly inclusive, we couldn't be rigid in what we did.

In church we hold dear to our traditions and practice and that's not wrong but if something's important to us, we need to be open to asking *why* it matters so much. What might we be prepared to *let go of* in order to help someone else find meaning in worship. What *new* thing might we be willing to try.

However, I don't want to give the impression that it's all hard work. My little gang of special needs children brought so many unexpected moments of joy. I never forget watching Patrick, a four year old with Down's Syndrome, as he danced happily with his shadow in the

playground or hearing one of the mainstream children say. 'Lily's been a good girl. She hasn't bitten anyone today'- understanding that, for Lily, that did indeed signify progress.

Yesterday our church was open as part of Dunbar Street Trail and many people came by and stayed for refreshments. We had lots of little people swarming round the building leaving crumbs for Ossie, Diana's dog, to come and Hoover up! Friends gathered in groups and chatted. Many people enjoyed looking round the building. At one point, the heavens opened and a great crowd of people came hurrying into the church to take shelter. There was no hesitancy on their part. It seemed perfectly natural to come through our doors. They could come just as they were, with children, buggies and wheelchair and be welcomed. We're working towards our church being open every day. Can we be flexible and accommodating and extend our welcome to *everyone*? I think so! Can we be as welcoming and accommodating in our worship on a Sunday? I *hope* so! Will our life together be enriched as a result? I *know* so. Amen