

## **Minister's Letter. August 2017.**

Hello- I return from my trip to France, it is good to be back. Aldam and I had a week in the Charente Maritime area, near Royan. It was a lovely break with lots to see and experience. The weather could have been kinder, but the place we stayed and the hosts that ran the Chambre D'Hote could not have been any kinder or considerate. And we had a great time walking and exploring and making each other laugh!

On the Sunday morning that we were there I went to Church at the Eglise Reformée in Royan. I walked in at 10.20am and waited to be handed a hymn book and service order and, without a word or welcome from anyone, found an empty pew, sat down and started to read the sheet for the day. I was delighted that I understood and recognised some of the texts immediately (even though they were in French!). The church has a series of visiting ministers in the Summer time and it was clear that Pasteur Bruno Holcroft had little idea about how to use a microphone, the lights decided to play up as worship began and the organist was having a bad day as a couple of times she completely stopped playing and started the tune again! So it was a sort of 'normal' church service where things that are beyond our control can go wrong and with which I am familiar (when I forget the offertory or the microphone goes off in the middle of the sermon due to failed batteries!) What was amazing was that even though I was a long way from familiar territory, I realised once again that we have so much in common with churches all over the world- the type of sentiments being shared, the Bible readings, the prayers and the singing and the offertory (even though theirs was collected in bags on the end of a kind of fishing pole!!). More unites us than divides us. And when he preached about the church and about sharing our faith and used the words of the Great Commandment in relation to going out and sharing God's love with the world and make disciples, it was all stuff I felt quite in touch with. That was reassuring and encouraging. He asked about how many people would want more people in church and how many would like to see more children there and a few people responded and replied positively. And then the service ended and I sat for a few moments and then got up and walked past about 10 people and they looked at me and no one spoke to me and I got to the door and went to shake hands with the Pastor and he asked if I was well and I replied yes and that I was a minister from England and he said his grandfather was English and turned around and addressed the next person and so I left. What a difference there was between their words and their actions! The next day we went on a Petit Train around Rochefort and the welcome we got from the lady driving the train was amazing. We asked if we could eat our lunch whilst waiting for the train to go and she beamed and replied of course and then came round and asked us if we had had a good lunch and were well fed! And the whole trip she made a special effort to include, welcome, explain and generally make sure everyone felt they had had the best experience possible. The same happened on our boat trip. And at the Chambre D'Hote. Welcome, joy, concern and care. Contributing to, even briefly, a sense of belonging.

The thing with being away from your normal routine and living space is that you have time to think, really think. And the Church experience made me sad, made me reflect on what we do as churches, made me consider how good we are at welcoming, really welcoming. It is always hard when a visitor comes into church, especially if you are not there each week and so are not sure whether it is the first time they have come or not. And the dilemma is what do you say? And perhaps it is the job of the minister, or the Elders, maybe they might ask a hard question and I won't know the answer and so it is better to say nothing.....all sorts of issues. BUT we follow Jesus. The man who welcomed and invited in, who responded to people and talked to them and made them feel they had worth. So actually the welcoming SHOULD be something we do naturally. I have to say the experience I had in Royan is one I have had before in a church. (And perhaps there is also the opposite problem- the

over welcome! What do we do when we almost tackle people at the door and manhandle them to take coffee and then insist they sign the visitors' book and get them to promise they'll be back. We are often so pleased to see a new face, we do not know how to respond authentically!)

I reflected that welcoming is about being true to who you are. Just say hello. Look around and on seeing someone new, just smile, then say your name and ask theirs. Perhaps prepare a question in your head that you can ask of a visitor? Something kind of generic and non-threatening (asking their view on the virgin birth on first meeting might be a step too far!). Welcoming strangers is hard. Finding words to say to open a conversation can be daunting. BUT if we do want to see our churches live, then we have to find ways to be Christ to the world. And that means engaging with the outcast, marginalised, stranger and person who is different. For so long the people in churches have expected people to come in and be like them; we have to be prepared to step out and find common ground with those we encounter nowadays, NOT assume people will come to us anymore.

The Great Commandment seeks us to go and make disciples of those we meet. How do we do this? It is not a case of speaking the Bible to them. It is not opening a conversation with I go to church, want to come? For so many people nowadays, church has no relevance or is something way beyond people's experience that we have to start in a different place. We need to start conversations, we need to share experiences and thoughts, we need to find common ground. And we need to try to understand how, for each of us, the Gospel message of love, joy, hope and peace can be lived out in the encounters we have. What speaks of Jesus? How do our words and actions match up?

If we believe that God is still working in the world, through us, through the church, through relationships and encounters and experiences, we have to think about our part in it all. And truly welcoming- whether to a Sunday service, a Community Meal, An Afternoon Cream tea, A Bible Study, a concert or a fundraising event. What is it that says to people- God is here? Is it the way we really listen, the kind words we say, the fellowship we show to others, the gentle way we treat others who are different? Because it ought to be. People should encounter us and feel there is something different and ask what, how, why? Jesus showed us how to live. God calls us to live the life of faith. And if we truly believe that the church has a place in this society still, what are we doing to welcome and to give a sense of belonging? It is not the responsibility of one person or the Elders or the long term members, it is the responsibility of us all. And the sort of welcome we receive affects our response. Would I go back to a church that spoke of welcoming and yet ignored me? Would you? So what are we each doing to ensure that no one goes away from an encounter with us, as church, feeling as if they have been ignored? It is our responsibility. And one we can practice each and every day. By a smile, a sharing of a story, a kind enquiry and a handshake or reassuring gesture. Christ is in those we meet. If every time we encountered someone we remembered that, it may change our responses!

So take some time to think about how you welcome. Take some time to think about how your actions and words match up. And don't beat yourself up, but ask God to work through you to change and amend and adapt what you do so it becomes more Christ-like.

Let us give thanks for the Good News of God's Kingdom here on earth, for the glimpses we see and the possibilities before us. And then let us seek to be bringers of that love to those we meet. Because we have it within our power and grasp to be the ones who make others feel welcome and feel they belong and to help them begin to find the Godness inside themselves and develop their awareness of a God of love revealed in creation and continuing to be revealed each and every day. And then find their way of being Christ to the world, too. Blessings, Jenny.