

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me.”

Over the last two years we've talked quite a bit in our church about welcoming. On the whole we think we're quite good at making people who come to our church welcome, whether for services or the range of other events we put on, but we've also realised that there is much more to welcoming than saying hello and smiling. Is our church warm and comfortable? Not always. Are our services accessible to those who have no background of church going? Well, we do use a lot of churchy words and sing hymns which we know but others may not. Do we serve decent coffee? That's got a lot better! Not to mention the cupcakes....

During lockdown we've discovered new ways to welcome people. Our Zoom services have gone well (despite the odd technical hitch) and our pastoral care network has made sure that we keep in contact with each other. We've kept the church yard looking lovely and we're now able to welcome visitors to our church once more. Now that the government have announced that churches can reopen for public worship from 4th July we have new challenges: how can we restart services while still making worship available to those who are understandably nervous about coming to church?

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples his final instructions before sending them out to teach and to heal. He warns them that not everyone will want to hear their message and that they will face rejection. But he tells them, 'Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me - and the one who sent me.' These profound words find an echo later on in St Matthew's gospel when Jesus talks about the sheep and the goats. 'When I was hungry you fed me', the Son of Man tells the sheep, as he offers them a place in his kingdom. 'Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matt.25.40)

That's the kind of welcome Jesus wants us to give: not just a friendly hello, although that is a good start, but a real welcome which enquires about people's deepest needs and then seeks to meet them.

Last Monday, 22 June, was kept as Windrush Day, the 72nd anniversary of the arrival at Tilbury docks of the troop ship Empire Windrush, bringing 900 Afro-Caribbean people to Britain. After World War II, the British government recruited Afro-Caribbean migrants and offered them jobs.

The first Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the United Kingdom were faced with extreme intolerance from many of the white population. Many early immigrants were denied access to private employment and accommodation because of the colour of their skin. Black people were also banned from pubs, clubs, and even churches. Andrea Levy's novel 'Small Island', recently dramatised by the National Theatre, gives a moving account of the experiences of one immigrant family.

And now, as a result of the Black Lives Matter campaign, churches and cathedrals are examining their statues and memorials which commemorate former slave traders.

We need to acknowledge that our country was deeply involved in the slave trade in the 18th century and that our economy profited from it. We also need to recognise the more recent history of hostility and discrimination against people of colour, and that this continues today as a result of ignorance and fear. When that ignorance and fear affects our own attitudes we need to repent. And that means going beyond good words to more concrete actions.

In July we will be able to worship once more in God's house. Let us make sure that we welcome all, not just into our building but into our Christian family, because by doing so we welcome Jesus and the one who sent him, God himself.