

Father welcomes all his children to his family through his Son.

Bible reference for sermon John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Have there ever been times in your life when you have felt enveloped in love, part of family, community, of being in a special relationship where you felt accepted and safe?

I can think of such times in my life. In times of joy (births, weddings, birthdays, graduations, winning grand finals, good

news, working in a team to achieve something, rejoicing with people you love, maybe as community) and perhaps most especially in times of difficulty say when we or a loved one is unwell. This community...you have shown and surrounded me and my wife Sue in love and care. It is a very special gift and when you receive it. You know it.

Have you known such times of acceptance and love in your life? In times of joy and in times of pain?



A CATHEDRAL WELCOME

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, gay, confused, filthy rich, comfortable, or dirt poor. LOBBERS

We extend a special welcome to wailing babies and excited toddlers.

We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You're welcome here if you're just browsing, just woken up or just got out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury, or haven't been to church since Christmas ten years ago.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit mums, football dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like 'organised religion.' (We're not that keen on it either)

We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or are here because granny is visiting and wanted to come to the Cathedral.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both or neither. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as kids or got lost in the city centre and wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters...and you!

With kind permission of Coventry Cathedral

Or what of the opposite? Have you known times in your life when you felt on the outer, left out or even worse, that you've been excluded from relationship, from community? When I introduced the Statement of Welcome from Coventry Cathedral, many of you responded positively to it. One person was courageous and shared their negative experience of our welcome or lack of it. They felt on the outer. Ever known this?

The man born blind in our gospel text today knew all too well of being excluded. And to him today comes one who is the light and who shines light in the darkness of exclusion. To this man born blind comes one who is a

shepherd, a Good Shepherd who gathers the lost to himself and who restores the excluded to the community of God.

Today we explore what this means for us, and we will ask two questions:

- 1. What does Jesus Christ mean for me in terms of belonging to God's community of life?**
- 2. What does this mean for me and for us in welcoming and including those who feel excluded?**

John 9 introduces us to a man born blind. And this after we heard last Sunday of the Samaritan woman at the well who evangelized a city by saying "come and see". Ironic don't you think?

And because of his blindness there is an assumption amongst people that he or his parents are great sinners.

And of course, Jesus says its neither.

But there's already a perception and an exclusion of this man. "there's something wrong with this guy. What's he done to deserve such a punishment? He surely doesn't belong" He's likely to have known this all his life. He knows the agony of exclusion all too well.

And Jesus comes to him. Jesus finds this man. Just as he found the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Jesus crosses boundaries and finds the one excluded and seeks him out.

And so, begins a journey with Jesus for this man from exclusion to inclusion; from being driven out to being enveloped in love and valued. From being blind to becoming a witness to Christ.

The man's condition as understood by the disciples and the Jewish leaders is that he is born in sin (and they're right...that is the Original Sin that we all carry). But they believe that they are somehow righteous before God and so they belong, but he doesn't.

The plight of the man is further born out in the story where his parents abandon him in fear that they will be "put out of the synagogue". And John tells us that the Jewish leaders "revile" the man -such a strong verb! and "they drove him out" a verb used for Jesus driving our demons. What the man knew of exclusion is reinforced and rammed home by these self-righteous leaders.

Excluded. Driven out!

But to him has come one who sees him, and who seeks him out and who finds those who are on the outer and who are lost. To him comes one who is light and whose light shines restoration on the excluded sinner who trusts in him.

The story of the man born blind resonates with me as I think of how I am restored by Jesus and how my faith grows as I listen to him over the course of my life. The amazing beauty of the faith of this man as it grows is like that of the Samaritan woman. She told the city that he told her everything she had ever done. The blind man too follows the voice of Jesus before he sees him. The Word and promise of Jesus brings life and inclusion.

Jesus' voice continues for this man and for you and me today in John 10, where we meet the Good Shepherd whose voice his sheep, his flock of saintly sinners hear and trust. We know his voice and listen to him. He leads his flock from the snares of the thief who would destroy and separate the sheep from their Shepherd and has life for them, life to the full which includes the key aspect of bringing more and more into his flock, into his community. To accept those on the outer who look to him for hope.



Isn't that our story? Yours and mine? Are not our faith stories and lives of being included in God's family of life the same as this man? We too were lost but now found by our Saviour, Jesus as the Holy Spirit brought us to faith through the Word. We too have been included in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

What does Jesus Christ mean for me in terms of belonging to God's community of life? Short answer. Everything! By his cross and sacrifice for us, Jesus Christ has rescued me and you from the sentence of eternal exclusion from God. And he has brought us the gift of forgiveness and faith to see Christ for us. We are included in the family of God.

What a gift to give thanks for! Lord, I believe! Say it strong!

And what does this say to us as community of faith when we are called to people who feel left out, put out and excluded in our society? Who are the Samaritans? Who are the blind ones in our lives? Are we prepared to go where Jesus goes? Are we prepared to welcome and include?

18 months ago, we dwelled in the Word and prayed and discerned what key themes and values we share as community. A number of them speak to the question of inclusion:

- **Welcoming and belonging: Aspiration to be a welcoming and safe space for all people, particularly marginalised groups and those who feel distant from traditional church settings.**

- **Diversity and inclusion: Emphasis on women's ordination, gender equality more broadly, and cultural diversity.**
- **Unity and community: Working side by side in service and being united in Christ's love as a family despite our differences.**

All underpinned by the grace of God received as community in Word and Sacrament:

- **Worship and spiritual purpose: Ensure that worship (word and sacrament) and prayer remain central, accessible, and meaningful to all members. Emphasis on intergenerational faith-sharing and deeper scriptural engagement.**

So, it seems to me that we have an active role we can play in welcoming and including those who are rejected and on the outer.

Human beings so often see just the scandal, the sin and want to exclude on this basis. But Jesus comes. Crosses boundaries, finds and sees the person to restore and include. That's our story. Yours and mine. so let's answer the question:

What does this mean for me and for us in welcoming and including those who feel excluded?

Pastor Sue and I welcome your thoughts. If you'd like to reflect and send an email to Pastor Sue or I this week. On the sheet will be a suggested welcome statement:

"Whoever you are; whatever you've done; wherever you're at.

You are welcome here"

What does each phrase mean to you in how we welcome people to St Paul's? Write it down and send it through to us.

Please provide your first thoughts. They don't need to be fully formed.

The joy of inclusion in God's family. Today and eternally, this is God's gift. "Come and see". How do we invite and welcome all in our community to come and see and to come and hear that Christ is for them?

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>