

Inclusiveness is one of the major themes of Luke's Gospel.

FIRSTLY, it is clear from the careful arrangement by the Gentile Luke of the content of his Gospel that Christianity is for both Jew and Gentile, for both men and women; and on an equal basis.

For example, in Luke chapter 5, the familiar story of the call of the salt-of-the earth Jewish Simon-Peter (following the miraculous catch of fish) is immediately followed by the call of Levi, the Gentile-collaborator, tax-collecting for the hated Roman occupation force. Both are called by Jesus to follow him on an equal basis.

Luke also, throughout his Gospel, pairs up miracles; so similar miracles are recorded as happening to men and women generally alternately in the way Luke structures his writing. This again emphasises the inclusiveness in Jesus' ministry; men and women are treated equally.

Jesus' mission, Luke points out, is for **everyone**. Who Jesus *is*, is relevant to everyone. In Luke's view, *that* is why the Early Church grew so much.

SECONDLY, in the last two Sundays (in our consideration of Luke chapter 14) we have seen inclusiveness expressed in table fellowship. You will recall that Jesus has been at a meal at the house of a leading Pharisee and has told three rather pointed stories about choosing places at table, choosing guests for the meal, and about guests who make excuses when invited to a banquet. Luke's take home messages have been clear for both the Early Church's fellowship and our own:

- be humble rather than expect a place of honour
- be welcoming and inclusive of outsiders rather than being a safe exclusive clique
- and don't reject the invitation to the feast (a clear side-swipe at the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus' invitation to fellowship with God in God's Kingdom (what we now call Christianity); and, of course, they rejected the Eucharistic meal, the central act of early Christian fellowship).

THIRDLY, Luke goes on (in chapter 15, the first part of which is today's Gospel) to expand on that inclusiveness further. Luke says, in effect, that we have to put some effort into going out and seeking outsiders to include them.

Like God himself, we too are to go out to seek the lost sheep and to search diligently for lost coins; people, like sheep, stray from God's ways and have to be sought out and brought back to God; people are precious, like coins, and it is worth spending time and effort to recover them.

These stories underline that **the inclusiveness Luke talks about requires mission**.

FINALLY, in the parable of the Prodigal son (the final part of chapter 15) Luke goes on to say that God welcomes the return of the one who strays from him. Both the one who strays and the one who remains have the love of their Father. God's love is inclusive of the faithful and the wayward alike.

Luke is also saying that it is the rightful and inclusive inheritance of all of us to be with the Father. No matter if wilfully we wander away, the rejoicing is great on our return to God.

Luke doesn't hide the problems associated with such radical inclusiveness for the Early Church.

Hear again the opening words of today's Gospel: *'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*' (15v1-2)

They show two important things about such inclusiveness:

- that Jesus faced criticism from the religious old-guard (the Pharisees). They were affronted that he spent time with religious outsiders, tax-collectors and sinners. He even defiled himself, sinned in their eyes, by eating with these outsiders.
- that in order to be inclusive within the Christian community you must spend quality time with people outside that community. A regular complaint levelled against Jesus was that he was the friend of

outsiders, Roman collaborators, sinners and prostitutes. Not only did he spend time with them, he met them on their terms, he had empathy with them and befriended them. He included them in his life. **So should the church**, Luke implies.

I guess that the present day equivalent of those two features of inclusiveness for today's national church is

- that *corporately* we can expect opposition from the religious old-guard to bringing new people into our fellowship; a resistance to changing our traditional ways to accommodate them
- that *personally* we should each maintain significant outside interests, befriending non-churchgoers and then inviting them into our fellowship, into relationship with Jesus through the body of Christ.

I think I'd argue that most congregations experience the first (resistance to outsiders and change), and don't do enough of the second (befriending outsiders and inviting them in).

Inviting outsiders in, means that we have to work at eliminating both these obstacles:

- *corporately* we have to accommodate our traditions to meet new people where they are;
- and *personally* we have maintain a healthy balance between church and non-church activities, even if that means saying 'no' to churchy stuff more often, and thereby letting some churchy activities die.

This challenges both our empathy with outsiders and our inclusiveness, as we must accommodate our ways in order to meet their needs, particularly for the under-35 'millennial' generation.

As for St Peter's, our new management structure centres around 12 Ministries, all of which have been on display in the narthex as you enter church. I would argue that the challenge for *each* of these ministries is:

'How can we at St Peters express the radical inclusiveness of Luke's Gospel in what we do?'

For that is how the Early Church grew, according to Luke; that is how we too may grow.

Again, this is a challenge to our empathy, to our inclusiveness and to our willingness to accommodate newcomers.

[(for 9.45) This empathy and inclusiveness is well expressed in the words of today's offertory hymn, written by Kate Compston some ten years ago.

*'I dream of a church that joins in with God's loving
As she bends to embrace the unlovely and lost,
A church that can free, by its sharing and daring,
The imprisoned and poor, and then shoulder the cost.'*

The difficult bit, actually, is shouldering the cost. Unwillingness to accommodate newcomers, unwillingness to shoulder the cost, often impairs the church's willingness to go out to embrace the unlovely and lost. We simply don't want to add to our problems!

I hope you'll all take the relevant hymn-sheet home to look at later.]

A final thought: We make the claim that we are an 'Apostolic' church; this means that we are not simply founded on the work of the Apostles, but that we are actively apostolic ourselves. That is, we go out to share the good news of Jesus to those we encounter in the world around us, and welcome them into the Kingdom of God. We too search for the lost sheep and the lost coins in our community and embrace them with God's loving.

The pervasive inclusiveness in Luke's Gospel requires us to be in mission, befriending and welcoming outsiders and accommodating their needs in our fellowship – shouldering the cost, preferably joyfully.

That is how the EC grew. That way we can grow.

AND only that way can we be truly Apostolic.

Amen.