

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

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Christians have taught for centuries that our Sacraments are Signs. Different churches have counted different numbers of Sacraments; but scholars agree that the Eucharist is preeminently Jesus' own Sign. So his Church must hold his Sign up clearly. I want to talk now about ways we can make Jesus' Sign so clear that even unchurched people can get it right off: that way it's a Sign of the gospel, the good news about Jesus as well.

Luke's and John's gospels say Jesus did Signs and Wonders, and in Hebrew scripture those differ. Doing Wonders can prove any prophet's spiritual power, and change the course of battles. But a Sign shows people what God is already doing, maybe always doing, while they somehow dangerously fail to see, even when their own experience of God should make it plain. Therefore the prophet tries some dramatic gesture to show them even plainer, hoping to overcome their tragic blindness. Jeremiah calls city leaders out to the Jerusalem garbage dump and breaks a pot and says: here's what God will do to our nation if you don't wise up. Jeremiah doesn't pretend he's breaking up the nation; he's using a pot for a Sign, of what God is up to for real. Jeremiah's Sign failed in his time, because his leaders went on blindly as before, and his nation was destroyed. Yet Jeremiah's Sign still speaks to every Bible reader, telling them what God is always up to. Who knows what they learn to see today, or how they live in response?

In Jesus' time everyone yammered about God's kingdom coming: when, how, where, with what result. But Jesus' parables have a unique theme: God is here working with you right now; it's too late to prepare for God's coming, to manage, to control God's work; instead, your response right now makes all the difference. And so to help people see what they were failing to see, Jesus made a Sign out of Isaiah's prophecy about a banquet where the Israelites and their pagan enemies, the clean and the unclean, would dine together one day. Jesus summoned all the Wrong People to his table, dining with them publicly.

Scholars tell us this Sign was so offensive, both religiously and politically, it led straight to Jesus' death. So you might expect the Church would repeat his Sign just the way he did, because showing Jesus life and death to the world is our chief job. But Jesus' own worst enemies read his Sign more clearly than his Church has often done since. Luke's gospel(15:2) preserves an insult directed at Jesus, and thus our surest evidence about him. We spelled out that insult in decorous gilt Greek letters on our altar table at St Gregory's: "This guy (*houtos*) welcomes sinners and dines with them." For centuries Christians have argued about the second verb there—about what we are eating when we keep Jesus' memory this way. But the first verb is first for good reason, because it carries Jesus' own real meaning: THIS GUY WELCOMES. Today Church Growth

writers talk a lot about making our buildings welcoming, our services welcoming, our music welcoming, our ministers and church members welcoming. Of course we work hard to do that here at every St Gregory's Church liturgy. But the real reason for our hospitality is not to grow a bigger church. The real reason is to show Jesus to the world.

And the chief impact is not on our visitors. Some of our visitors do come back, as we hope, and some join up; but numerically most don't. Many visitors are traveling anyway; and some are hunting for a different kind of music, or social style, or ethnic or age group, or any number of things they may still be out there hunting for. The chief impact of our hospitality is on our own life right here. In my student days I traveled through Europe staying at monasteries as a guest because monasteries interested me (and they were cheap!) and as a guest I discovered what I'll call Fabian's Law of Hospitality. Contrary to what you sometimes hear "Those folks are really warmly knit together, but unfriendly to outsiders," in fact groups treat outsiders pretty much the way they treat insiders. You can tell right away from the welcome you get, just how much the group's members accept each other, and know they can rely on each other—how much welcome they experience there. A welcoming church is a loving church, and an unwelcoming church loves nobody, and every visitor feels it. Our liturgical welcome is a Sign anyone can read.

Let me describe some ways we hold up the Sign of Jesus' hospitality.

At St Gregory's we put newcomers first, all the time. It's a Sign for all to read, just the way Church Growth writers say "Put signs up everywhere pointing to the bathrooms" and other facilities, because newcomers will know right away that you want them to be at ease whether they need the bathroom now or not. We address every announcement, every instruction, every action for newcomers to follow, and we know that our old timers will experience again the welcome they already find here. Of course, welcome is different from compulsion; and true hospitality means making the church services always available, so people know they are welcome to take part as they choose -- and if they don't take part, they are still welcome. That takes practice, and planning, and reminders when we slip into in-jokes or apologies to people who've heard this before, or anything that suggests newcomers are different from old timers. By Fabian's Law, they are the same.

In recent studies, most people who join a church say they decided to do so within three minutes of entering it. That means the first moments of a service will set the context for everything afterward. Outside on the steps, a greeter welcomes everyone arriving, new or old, and hands them a music book. And inside, more greeters guide them to a welcoming table for nametags and anything else they will need at this service. As the choir begin a choral prelude, the vested clergy emerge from their vestry and move among the crowd, touching each with a quiet word of welcome. This is no handshake—we deliberately extend the left hand,

conveying affection rather than formality, because affection is the context our old timers share. More than that, St Augustine wrote that worship begins in awe and ends in affection; so we move affection right up front.

We move MUSIC up front, too -- good music, probably higher quality than most churches give newcomers to sing, because good church music is more powerful. And nearly every part of the service we can sing, we will sing. So after a welcome from the presider, our Music Director begins at once introducing today's music in away all can join in. Many Americans today have been told they can't or shouldn't sing; it isn't necessary to rehearse the hymns, only to create enough familiarity—or the illusion of familiarity -- so people will understand they're welcome to sing nevertheless.

Of course it takes serious planning to create an experience like that. We choose hymns and chants that are easy to pick up, by ear or with simple musical notation, and our own composers write more of those every year. We begin each in unison, moving to harmony on the second verse. And for many processions we use call-and-response, or repeated refrains answering a solo cantor: these join rich variation in scripture text with ready congregational participation. They also cut down on paper -- we give people only the paper they'll need to sing, to keep everyone's heads out of books and into the liturgical action, newcomer and old timer alike. (When our people are busy eating and drinking at the altar, the choir will sing more complex music on their own.) Likewise, you know that at the end of our services we dance carols, or circle dances: these we will introduce on the spot. First we teach an easy repeating step with rhythm instruments, and once the step is moving steadily, we start singing along.

And throughout the liturgy we ANNOUNCE everything we're about to do, so people hear that the most ignorant newcomers are welcome. You don't have to know anything to take part here. Each announcement we script carefully, giving information in exactly the order a newcomer can follow in thought and action. And we announce only what we'll do right now, so they have no need to remember things. Nevertheless, we watch newcomers for signs of confusion, and every week after church we revise the script to guide them better. Only one announcement is repeated: twice we invite all to share the bread and wine which are Christ's body and blood, and to respond with their own gifts for the world's needy and the church's work. We make clear the Eucharistic bread and wine are Christ's body and blood so that no newcomer will be surprised when these are offered, and sure enough, every Sunday a few visitors do decline communion and receive a blessing instead. Nevertheless the coffee hour that follows in the same altar area distributes food and drink from the same altar table, and includes everyone who wishes to share it.

Deacons have the task of marshaling everyone, so everyone can carry out their part in our common liturgy. So naturally, most announcing is our Deacons'

work. We train them to aim every remark, every gesture at newcomers, fixing their mental attention on one or two visitors if necessary. When Deacons select readers and assist them by pointing the text, or guide children bearing the gifts of bread and wine to the table, they convey the context of hospitality, modeling welcome for church members to help newcomers out in turn. Hospitality is a natural human behavior, after all; our adversary here is ALIENATED worship. Alienated worship shows up when people don't help guests out or fix things that go wrong, the way they would at home the way any host or hostess would do. When Church members don't host newcomers, that's because they don't feel at home here themselves. It's Fabian's Law again: groups treat outsiders and insiders basically the same.

The Sign of Hospitality that Jesus chose, came first from Isaiah's prophecy about Jews and Heathen dining together. Throughout our building, St Gregory's liturgical art and vestments honor God's conversation with the whole world, visibly evoking this original sense - note the icons of saints from every faith dancing overhead as we dance below, and Jesus leads all. On Good Friday we wear vestments drawn exclusively from religions outside Christianity, to symbolize the universal significance of Christ's death and resurrection. And all year long our use of scripture exemplifies prophetic hospitality. Inclusive and expansive language are important for Christian mission today, and for this there is no clear standard yet. So we combine several approaches at every service. Overall, we work on building up feminine imagery in our readings, prayers and songs, without suppressing masculine language. It's a slower reform method than some, but makes clear everyone belongs. And after readings and meditative silences and a sermon, we invite anyone to share experiences of their own that these have brought to mind. We do NOT invite opinions or arguments, but only shared life experience, something people with widely differing opinions can receive openly and respond to in turn. (Sometimes the presider must intervene to keep this sharing on track!) In fact, St Gregory's membership comprises a wide spread of political opinion, and both left and right wingers alike sing in our choir, volunteer in our food pantry, teach in our classes, and party together. Their combined participation shows it's safe for everyone here, whether people choose to speak up or not. Making people know they are welcome is our prophetic work. The Church need only make clear the Sign Jesus chose. How people respond is up to them, and to God.