

Making Church Accessible

- *Mission Series #6*

Introduction

- Getting near to the end of our series on mission.
- This and one more - both these last two looking at some ways we might need to be thinking about changing church, changing ourselves, to help the process of reaching out with the gospel
- Most of what we have looked at up to now, though it has had application for the church as a whole, has been mainly individual:
 - at our mindset;
 - at praying for mission;
 - at the relationships we will develop with friends and neighbours through which we may share the gospel;
- This week we are going to be looking at how we might make the church more accessible for those who are not yet Christians
- In two weeks we'll spend some time exploring what happens when we do have new, young, baby Christians in church:
 - how do we nurture and care for them?

What is it like to be new?

- Imagine what it is like to turn up at a party or a dinner/dance or some other function where you don't really know anyone, and you've never been to the venue before:
 - you don't know which door to use, or where best to park your car, so you end up parking a fair bit from the entrances;
 - everyone else seems to know where they are going, but you don't know which of the two entrances you should use;
 - you get to the door, and there are some people standing around, but you don't know whether they are there to welcome you and show you the way in, or are just waiting for friends, so you don't talk to them;
 - feeling a bit embarrassed and slightly self-conscious you come through into the main room where everyone is gathering - not sure where to sit;
- All that, and you've only just arrived!
- Imagine the potential for embarrassment and uncertainty during the evening:
 - formal dinner - which glass do you toast with, which cutlery?
 - party - where are the loos, is there going to be a big buffet later or are the finger foods out just now all there will be?
 - *(my mum and dad at reception for a posh wedding in East Lothian - chips on way home!!)*
- We don't like being embarrassed, we feel uncomfortable in new situations where we feel out of our depth.
- For many, many people that is what church is like!
- I deliberately came out from behind the lectern just now because I hoped it would make you feel slightly uncomfortable:
 - it was something unexpected!
 - (though perhaps less uncomfortable for us than in some other churches!!)
- That kind of discomfort is what many people feel as they come to church
 - people they don't know (or not well);
 - a building that is unfamiliar;
 - a peculiar routine - relative formality of a service, standing for hymns, sitting for prayers (opposite of the Free Church!), Lord's Prayer, sit down after every hymn except the last one....!
 - never mind the odd language!

Move out from
behind lectern and
just wander around!!

Return to lectern

Paul made them feel safe

- Paul was seeking to make Jesus known to the Greeks in Athens.
- Paul realised that they were not familiar with much that he could take for granted when speaking to Jews in synagogues:
 - didn't know Old Testament, for a start!
- Would have felt uncomfortable and unsure listening to one of Paul's normal sermons.
- So Paul went out of his way to make them feel comfortable, feel safe - so that they could hear the gospel

Paul went to their place

- Paul first of all went to places where they felt comfortable.
- First the marketplace (v.17) and later the Areopagus (v.19).
- By going onto "their" territory, using somewhere where people felt comfortable, he allowed them to hear the message he was proclaiming in a way that would not otherwise have been possible.
- I wonder how comfortable people feel coming into a church building?
 - partly the basic unfamiliarity of a building they don't know;
 - architecturally also quite different from what people are used to (conference rooms; classrooms (no rows!); dinner dances; homes; workplaces - all much less formal!)
 - we must find make this place as welcoming, as accessible as possible, for there will be some who will still come to a church building in their seeking after God, in their desire for help...
 - but we must go further, and move to where people are, physically, culturally, emotionally...
- For this place is also a place associated in many people's minds with:
 - being told what to think
 - being told what to do
 - not a place to ask questions, to explore their own ideas about who God and hold them up alongside what Christians/the Bible says...

Paul spoke their language

- Quoting their poets (v.28).
 - kinda like a preacher using an illustration from the contemporary film world!!
- Got rid of everything that got in the way, and made sure people heard the content and not just the surface language...
 - this is a continual, hard challenge
 - for me as a preacher...
 - so in a Sunday gathering we will think about styles of communication, about what we do together (singing, prayers), about participation, about other voices...
 - but also at other times... when people ask you about your faith, do we speak in the language, with the illustrations and examples and assumptions of a culturally previous generation?

Conclusion

- Notice boards - not just "because it would be nice" - but to allow the gospel to be heard!
 - one of the first notices you used to see when you come into the halls at Dalziel St Andrew's in Motherwell was "No buggies beyond this point!"
- Story of a church in England - open vestibule/porch - big, bright yellow "Beware of car thieves" poster:
 - implication?
 - church is full of car thieves?
 - or area is full of car thieves, and if you dare to park your car here you can expect the hub caps to be lifted!

- What was in the background for Paul:
 - his heritage would have led him to expect that God was encountered in the specific place of worship, in the synagogue, with God's word read and explained....
 - he could have assumed that this still held true for those who were outside the faith, that they needed to come to a specific place of worship to encounter God...
 - but he didn't!
 - and neither should we...