

Come And See - Epiphany 2B

There are some moments in our lives we will never forget. Once upon a time (back in 2002), I went to a conference in Sydney on the East Coast of Australia. It was an Anglican Conference called Making Connections.

At the conference were delegates from all over Australia (both lay and clergy) as well as some from overseas, and very interesting speakers and theological - Phyllis Tickle is someone some of you may be familiar with.

On the first night of the conference, my Parish Priest N and another delegate from our parish decided to go to the local pub to unwind after dinner.

There were a few others from the west coast who joined us.

We ended up having a drink or two and played a couple of rounds of pool.

We were in teams - Jane and I and a young man we had recently met on one team and Rev. N, and another 2 older men on the other.

I don't remember all the men's names - except for a man in his late sixties I will call D.

He dressed casually, he had gentle eyes and was softly spoken and I just felt very at ease the moment I met him.

There was an unexplainable connection.

We ended up being on opposite teams.

My team had to shoot "biggs" and the other team, which D and Rev N were part of, were shooting "smalls"

Now I don't know if it was because of the one or two rounds of beverages that we shared but something made my new friend D have a very bad memory.

Every time it was his turn to take the cue and line up for a shot he would ask what he was supposed to sink - "Your team have the smalls" one of us would say.

This seemed to go on all night as we took our turns - every time it got to D he would chuckle and have a blank look... "You are smalls" we would say...

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... then he looked at me again and said "what" and my reply blurted out "You have the small balls D!"

I realized what I said and everyone burst out laughing hysterically.

On the walk back to our accommodation we recounted our lovely night and the fun we had sharing some drinks and playing pool with the boys.

I told them how naughty and warm I found our new friend D.

My priest N then informed me that the man in question was non other than the assistant bishop of the diocese!

That somehow made it all even more incredible - my first encounter with a bishop who was so human and real - I would never had known - but I really sensed and felt the depth of love and connection.

He truly was a man of God in a very tangible way.

Perhaps you too have met someone who you feel an instant attraction to?

I don't mean a romantic kind of attraction, but a sense of being drawn to that person...

...., wanting to spend time with them, listen and share with them...

....a type of love that brings joy and probably best described as like the phrase "peace that surpasses all understanding".

A sense of knowing, being and truly comfortable with each other...

I really can't describe it well - and we only have one word in English for the word love - that is thrown around to mean so many different things.

Greek has several words to describe different kinds of love - but the one I experienced with this man is agapeo - unconditional love - which - the love of God is agapeo.

If we think about the life of Jesus and the encounters that people had with him, we notice that he had a profound effect on them.

People were naturally drawn to him - from the crowds that gathered, to the disciples who left everything behind to follow him, those who came for healing and even the thief who was crucified alongside him.

There was something very compelling and special about Jesus.

So after meeting my new bishop- type friend and experiencing his very human agape presence ... (he is extremely humble by the way and I would imagine him squirming if he heard me sharing this),..

...I can begin to imagine the type of magnetic attraction and feel that being around Jesus would have been like - but to an even greater extent - wow!

When Jesus invited people to follow him, to come and see, they would have been extremely drawn and wowed.

When people met Jesus they were transformed.

Whatever their deepest need was, Jesus met it.

And people would go and tell others about Jesus and what he had done.

People who don't consider themselves "religious" sometimes ask me why I believe what I do and why I am part of a church.

For me, it isn't that I believe the bible cover to cover, or that I think Christianity is a good idea, or that I have nothing better to do each Sunday.

In fact, I too have been hurt by the church, I have been bored to tears at sermons from time to time and I have often asked myself why do I bother.

There are times when I haven't enjoyed going to church and I have had experiences where I have wanted to run a thousand miles.

The reason I come to church is because of Agapeo experiences.

I have experienced tangible love of God through individuals like D.

I have felt my spirit lifted and felt God's presence in silence,..on retreat and in community with someone close to death and in the midst of a Sunday Eucharist.

I experience God's presence in the people gathered each week as we break bread together and share our stories of struggles and triumph.

I hope you can relate to what I am saying and have had some experiences like this.

If it was just about the nuts and bolts - readings, rote prayers, chats and parish council meetings - I don't think I would have endured.

If that is people's only experience of church, I understand why they may not be in our ranks on a Sunday!

Our faith is rooted in our experience of God.

That is why what we do here is so important - our invitation, our welcome and our liturgy.

This place is somewhere where people have the opportunity to experience the love of God - In the Body of Christ - the Eucharist and us - people who become what they eat - The Body of Christ.

The word liturgy literally means "The work of the People".
How we prepare and participate in worship is vital.

Our worship, our liturgy should be beautiful, flowing and a conduit for people to encounter Christ.

When we prepare and partake in the liturgy we are setting the scene if you like,... preparing the environment for people to encounter the love of God.

Our music, singing, words, actions and silent pauses allow the possibility for agapeo.

If our worship is boring, tardy and lifeless, it is difficult for people to get a sense of reverence and sacredness.

Our body language, our posture and our movement all communicate our faith to others.

Holy Communion is the pinnacle of what we celebrate.

We are offering something different from the busyness and ordinariness of everyday life - that's why we engage ancient practices, use special objects - brass candles, fine linen (that the altar guild so lovingly care for and the frontals they create), gold plated chalices, flowers, vestments. We have beautiful music.

Times of silence give us an opportunity to be attentive in God's presence. When we return to our pews after receiving communion, we have the opportunity to rest in God in silence, sometimes with gentle music, giving thanks for all our blessings.

Please appreciate and use these silences and resist the urge to want to hurry on to the next bit and get to coffee hour. This is not a time for a quick catch up with the person next to us.

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Those experiencing the liturgy for the first time will appreciate the prayerful reverence and the atmosphere that silence creates.

There is already so much noise and chatter in our lives. The liturgy provides a sanctuary.

It is so important that our liturgy is the very best it possibly can be.

When we gather at the Eucharist - which was also referred to an Agape meal in the early church, we gather together as the Body of Christ.

We are humble, imperfect human vessels who become channels of God's love.

How we welcome and include other people is extremely important.

We are the gatekeepers of people's experience in church.

We all know that God is bigger than church and that people can encounter God anywhere.

Many people commune with God in nature. It doesn't have to be in church.

In the community of Christ gathered, there is the opportunity to encounter Christ in community.

To be loved by others and to belong.

A universal need and striving.

The saying passed down from the early years of the church still rings true: "See those Christians, how they love one another."

It is very rare for a person to find faith by just reading the bible or a devotional book.

It is far more common that a person starts their faith journey through an invitation by example, and often direct personal invitation to "come and see."

It is always person to person – personal.

The personal experience - the encounter with other people is crucial.

So How do we invite - why would they come?

What are we offering?

To be honest, I have been part of some congregations and I would be too embarrassed to invite people. I wondered why I was even there. That is not the case here at St Christopher's.

What is it we are offering people here at St Christopher's and how could it be even better?

Our task as Christians is not to “prove” the truth of the Christian faith.
Our task is not even to persuade others to become Christian.

Our task is to say, “Come and see.”

Come and see is a powerful invitation - an invitation to come and experience Christ. To see with the eye of the heart.

To take a look and have an encounter with no obligation - come share a meal with us, a discussion, come sing some songs, come to a peaceful place. Come as you are. We have lots to offer and share.

“Come, Holy Spirit, that we may see and taste the grace of God afresh. Come, Holy Spirit, that we might share the grace of God with others. “Come, Holy Spirit, that we might bear witness with our whole lives to the grace of God made manifest and available to us in Jesus. Amen.”