

Have you ever felt excluded? I remember as a child my brother and I had a ‘toy’ altar, candlesticks, chalice, paten, everything in miniature, everything plastic, but everything we needed to ‘play Mass’. I distinctly remember the reasoning behind my brother’s acceptance of me playing the altar boy, but most certainly never being allowed to play the priest! I was excluded on the grounds of gender. In adult life I was for several years in England a blood donor. Having moved to Scotland I presented myself at the blood donor’s one day to be asked to stand on the scales! Under 8 stone, sorry not allowed! Now I had never been 8 stone in my life, (at my height I would have been overweight) and I was in fact perfectly healthy. I remember being very indignant and trying to fight my case but, no, I was excluded on grounds of physicality. Of course these experiences didn’t last long but they help me to understand a little of what it must feel to be excluded for whatever reason. To feel ‘out’ of things, marginalized, not fully respected or valued and yet longing to be so.

One such character in the gospels is Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10). Zacchaeus finds himself excluded on two accounts, his physicality and his social status. We are told he was a small man, too short to see above the crowd, probably always pushed aside. Then he is further ostracised from the community because of his trade, he is a tax collector, a despised group. Zacchaeus had both physical and social barriers to cross if he wanted to feel included which his actions show he was obviously longing to be so.

When the whole town turns out to see Jesus, as he passes through Jericho, Zacchaeus ‘breaks through the barriers’ by climbing a tree, and thus gains access to Jesus. Jesus’ response shows us a whole new way of inclusion, of acceptance of the individual, **“Zacchaeus, make haste, come down; for I must stay at your house today.”** He finds himself opening the door of his home and his heart to welcome and offer hospitality to Jesus and further finds that ‘the one who comes as a visitor and guest, becomes the host and offers a hospitality in which human beings, and potentially the whole world, can become truly human, be at home, can know salvation in the depths of their hearts.’ 1

Jesus accepts Zacchaeus just as he is, no question of gender, physicality, socio-economic status, religious allegiance, just total openness and acceptance. The marginalized one who has given hospitality to Jesus, finds himself drawn into a much wider hospitality, the hospitality of God. **‘Today salvation has come to your house’.**

‘Salvation is not something purely for the future...Salvation begins here and now as Jesus and subsequently the Church in his name, seeks out, finds and incorporates within the community the excluded and the lost.’ 2 We could reflect that Jesus too crossed the barriers of exclusion, it

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wasn't quite the done thing to associate as he did, but he chooses to be identified with the marginalized, accept their hospitality and together experience the hospitality of God. **'I tell you solemnly, whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'** (Jn. 13:20)

Jesus brings Zacchaeus in from the margins to the centre. This gospel story leaves us a challenge. - The one everyone thought was outside or ought to be outside is inside. We are asked the question, 'Can you be at home in this inclusive community that the Son of Man has sought out and saved?' We are offered a paradigm, Zacchaeus, one of the marginalized provides hospitality to Jesus and finds in return the hospitality of God; a welcome into the community of salvation, his dignity and decency defended. It challenges the community to become more effectively a beach-head of the Kingdom where 'lost human beings' can find welcome and new life in the grasp of a hospitable God.³ Salvation concerns the whole of life and begins here and now, it is what Jesus' ministry is all about, not just on a personal level, as with Zacchaeus, but also what it means for the community to which Zacchaeus has been incorporated. **The Kingdom of God is inclusive, there all can find a home. 'Make your home in me as I make mine in you'** (Jn. 13:4)

Here in the Diocese of Galloway in Scotland, we are celebrating Spred's 10th anniversary. I might ask the question, 'Have we met the challenge' in Jesus' name to seek out and incorporate within the Christian community of Spred and the Parishes those that are excluded?

For years many people with learning and intellectual difficulties experienced rejection, isolation, marginalisation in both society and church. On sociological or medical grounds they were often hospitalised, institutionalised, excluded from the 'norm'. In education they might be either deemed 'ineducable' or segregated in 'special schools'. In the area of spirituality they were thought to be incapable of understanding. Now there are many different schools of thought, however, in the main these experiences caused feelings of exclusion and emphasised difference in a negative light. In the course of the last 50 years, research in spirituality and theology, in psychology and sociology, have paved the way for a new vision which is more inclusive and respectful of the individual. Social inclusion is now the order of the day.

Have we met the challenge, have we changed, become more open and inclusive?

The ministry of Spred can give prophetic witness to our church and society today, by creating community groups which model the hospitality of God where our Friends with intellectual problems are central, valued and respected for who they are.

For many years theological thinking excluded and denied sacramental access to those with special needs. Many families felt deeply this exclusion. Research has shown how 'spiritually aware' people with learning difficulties are and there have been developments in our theological thinking. In our diocese we have witnessed several children through the Spred programme completing the sacraments of Initiation; their right by virtue of their Baptism and a source of great joy and healing for their parents. Over these 10 years we have also celebrated with joy the inclusion of adult members of Spred who had previously been denied the sacraments - John, Pat, John, Kevin, Michelle. We have journeyed together in faith and continue to support one another in our personal spiritual development. The hospitality of God expressed by Jesus crossed boundaries, to social taboos of his time, welcoming all, restoring lost dignity. So we have witnessed the church widening its tent and including those previously excluded.

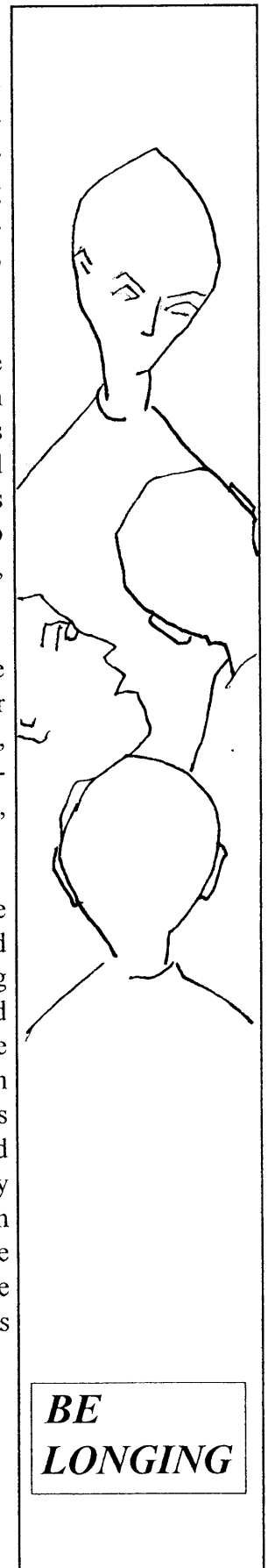
In our Spred mission statement we declare that we will offer ‘friendship, inclusion and belonging’. This is evidenced at every Spred session where ‘Welcome’ and ‘Hospitality’ are key movements. **‘I must stay at your house today’**. As each person arrives we are welcomed by the Activity Catechist. The room is ready and welcoming. After a period of working with our activities to calm and settle us, we are invited into the circle, mirroring the inclusivity of all, of our God, and we are again ‘called by name’ as we are welcomed by the Leader Catechist. Moving into the central part of our Spred session we gather around the Book of God’s Word. **‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him’**. (Jn. 14:23)

The intimacy which Jesus extends to Zacchaeus inviting him to cross the barriers of difference and exclusion, is extended to us. The Leader Catechist guides the movement of the session through the use of symbol to explore our lived reality, our experience of the God who makes his home with us. Barriers of difference and exclusion are nowhere to be seen as Catechist and Friends open and share together their lived experience, sometimes painful, lonely, sometimes wonderful or very simple. But in the intimacy of the group all feel included and accepted for who they are. In the light of the Gospel we are assured of God’s life shared intimately with us, **‘Today, salvation has come.’**

This becomes a reality for us each time we receive the Message. Having gathered around the Word, having shared intimately of our life experiences, having listened to God’s Word, the leader approaches each member, friend and catechist, and speaking directly to them gives the message, ‘Jesus, says to you today (name) ____’. Jesus, through his living Word, enters our hearts individually, speaks to us by name, **Today**. We could well hear the words of Jesus to Zacchaeus, ‘Today, Kathleen, Salvation has come to your house’.

My hope is that in some small measure, here in the diocese of Galloway over these 10 years we have met the challenge. From small beginnings in 1998 we have planted the seed of Spred and seen the first shoots develop into our 7 groups around the northern part of the diocese. During these years we have welcomed 54 friends, involving their family and care providers and trained 57 catechists with about 13 volunteers assisting with transport. Together we have extended the hand of friendship, created a sense of belonging and modelled inclusive communities where each is valued and respected. We have and will continue to climb the tree, to catch a glimpse of Jesus and to take on as his followers the ministry he has left us. We will continue to seek out and incorporate within the community those who are excluded, and to catch glimpses of our many Friends who are not apparent to us yet, and offer them the hospitality of God, bringing them in from the margins to the centre within our Spred groups and parishes. We know we will continue to catch glimpses of the depth of spirituality which our Friends experience and are willing to share with us, opening our eyes in wonder, in joy, in hope and expectation for, ‘Today Salvation has come to this house.’

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