

Every so often I receive a letter that makes my week. Listen to this – from Geoff – which is not his real name.

Dear Frances

I just wanted to write a few lines to thank you for being so kind to me. How you met with me, how you interacted with me made me feel (and believe) that I was truly part of the service. You helped me to “fit in”. Thank you so much. I had been feeling much anxiety and doubt that I would represent both prisoners and myself in a positive way. In fact all of the Cathedral members made me feel most welcome. As a life sentenced prisoner in for committing murder I have come across many incidences of prejudice on my journey. I never experienced any of this on Sunday, in fact I must say again how overwhelmed I was by the warmth and generosity of all I met.

As a Christian I was very moved by the whole occasion, being able to worship in such a wonderful place – hear the beautiful choir – and hear the many voices of a large congregation singing was – well something I will never forget.

Being at the Cathedral was also a very personal time for me. I was able to offer the Lord my amends, and thank Him for letting me do so with you all at the lovely service. When I came to prison in 2003 I came to die, the awfulness of what I had done in a drunken rage was too unbearable to face up to. I lost all my family, everyone I cared about. My actions bore a great cost to my victim’s family and friends. It was an awful thing all round. In 2006 I was finally ready to end my life and be done with the dread and shame I felt on a daily basis. The Lord intervened. He took me from a state of hopelessness and brought me into hope. He let me know I could be forgiven – and prompted me into accepting His forgiveness. My life changed in 2006 and though there have been many difficult times along the way – life is like that after all – He has never let me down, never let go of me. In my testimony it was Luke 15.11-31 that broke through to my heart and brought about the start of my repentance. “I was lost – but now am found.” Amen.

I don’t know if I’ll ever meet you again or indeed visit your beautiful Cathedral, but I can always remember you in my prayers and thank our Lord Jesus Christ for letting me share such a time of blessing with you and the lovely people I met. Thank you again Frances, I hope you get this letter. A big thank you to all the staff who were so kind to me.

What is so moving about this letter is the welcome he received. Not just from me – I hope that as Dean that would go without saying. But from all of us. We are a warm and welcoming congregation, and in that I rejoice. Would it have made a difference had we known, last week

at the Prisons Service, that we had someone in our midst who was a lifer for murder? I don't think so. I have every confidence we would have extended just the same warmth, regardless of his history. Regardless of whether he had been gay, or black, old or young.

As you came in, you received a flyer about inclusive church. We are on a process here towards registering as an Inclusive Cathedral. Chapter believe that it is the right thing to do as a way of signifying to anyone and everyone that regardless of who they are, they can be assured of a welcome here. Why bother? I hear you ask – if in practice we are that already? Let me say why. There are many people out there who are fearful of the sort of reception they might get from a church; even more so, from a Cathedral. Like Geoff, with his anxieties about whether he would be welcome, I come across people who assume that we will be stuffy and highbrow. Or anti-gay. Or not sure about women. There are people out there who think we are all like the Pharisee, who prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

If you turn to the inside of the flyer you will see the images that Mark Cazalet has been painting of people in prayer. He has captured a wide range of people – many of us, but also many who came into the Cathedral on spec; who didn't know what to expect. They found themselves in God's gaze, and found that it was a warm and open one, a searching and welcome gaze. Not many black faces, I know. But many who feel outcast for a number of reasons. Living with mental health issues. Or fearful that their sexuality will be accepted. I know, because Mark – without breaking confidences – told me just how surprised he was by the stories he heard. People were drawn in by the experience and left our Cathedral knowing this place to be one that welcomes all.

On the front of the leaflet is an image of Jesus Christ. An image made up of different faces, each of an individual who contributes to the whole. It's a good way of understanding how Jesus is present with us today. He is present as we gather and live together, as we join together with each other, regardless of our differences. Together we make up the body of Christ.

That sort of unity that transcends tribal factions and excessive individualism is desperately needed in the world of today. We know of violence and trauma, of insecurity and pain. Indeed, you could say, with Jeremiah, that we look for peace, but find no good; for a time of healing, but there is terror instead. One of the most common things to do when we are insecure is to blame others, to judge that person, castigate that one. “Not good enough! Guilty!” we say. “Thank God I am not like them!” We take it upon ourselves to exclude – sometimes, to our shame – in the name of God. It's very easy to do. The person on the receiving end feels stigmatised; isolated and lonely, cut off from the rest of humanity. The Pharisee is exhibiting just this social abjection to the poor sinner alongside.

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit – God – doesn't want our judgements and self-righteousness. God doesn't want our certainty that we are right.

God wants us to say, when we come to worship, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" God wants us, as we come into His presence, to say: I know myself to need the grace of God every minute, every day. Who am I to judge that person, this person? Who am I to presume to know their heart, their soul and its journey to God?

So please support our journey towards registration as an Inclusive Cathedral. If you have any questions, ask me – or any member of Chapter. This will make explicit what I believe is already the case: that we are welcoming, warm and reverent in our culture. It's the way we are.

I shall write back to Geoff and shall continue to write to him over the weeks and months ahead.

Please pray for him, and for any who feel excluded in today's world.

Pray that the Cathedral may be a place of refuge and welcome to all who come.