

Called to Inclusion

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to cast your minds back, if you can, to when you were at school. And I wonder what your favourite lessons were. Hands up for geography.

Yes. Ex-geography teacher. Well, you know, five of us, that's a bit, you know, I'll still talk to the rest of you, but that's a little bit sad. So geography was my favourite. French. Wow, two.

Okay, at least geography's not that bad. Maths. Cool. Got a bright lot here. PE. A few of you. I don't know about you, but I found PE kind of like Marmite.

You kind of love it, or you really hate it. My PE teacher was my form tutor, so I managed to skive off most weeks, because I forgot my PE kit. But he didn't want to give me a detention, because that would look bad on the figures for his class.

So I managed to skive off most of my PE lessons. But maybe some of you loved them. The footy in the rain, the cross-country along the beach, the rugby in the summer.

[1 : 00] Maybe the idea of joining your fellow pupils to bounce a basketball, or crack a cricket ball, or hoof a hockey ball, fills you with joy. Or maybe you'd rather kind of stay out of it.

And that was me. I didn't like any of it. We did cross-country along the beach, and I found quite a nice shortcut that if you found a certain bit in the dunes, the teacher couldn't see if you didn't run it all.

So me and my friends would sit there for 20 minutes, and then kind of pop out at the end, so she thought we'd run the whole four miles. Very naughty, I know. I didn't like the idea of pretending to care if my team won or lost.

I didn't like the bit where I was fielding at the back, and I always had to go and collect the ball that was whacked three miles by the guy that was really good at it. I didn't like any of it. But the worst bit for me was right at the beginning.

Maybe it was just our school that did this. Ritual humiliation. You pick the two team captains. Yeah, you know what I'm saying, don't you? You stand in a semicircle, and then they pick out the best ones, and the last ones, and then there's me left.

[2 : 06] And I thought if this video works, this might remind you of what it was like. This was me. All right, guys, let's play a little softball.

Be good team, gents. Oh, man, here we go. I've got Lewis. I've got Humphreys. Heathcliff. Sean. Pick me. Give me Richie. Jeremy. Pick me. Give me Nathan. Pick me. Whittington. No, he sucks. Mike. I'm good. Justin. Henry. Okay, white. Yeah. Yeah. All right, Debbie, I'm up.

Let's go. Let's go. That was literally my every PE lesson when I was in year eight, nine, ten, and eleven. But looking around at this, you lot, I'm sure that none of you experienced that.

[3 : 13] But I wasn't the second choice, or the third choice, or the fourth choice. I was sometimes the fifth choice if the team had five people in it. But one sunny lunchtime in year nine, that all changed.

I can remember sitting on our school field with my friends, sitting around, enjoying the sunshine, kind of ignoring the football that was going on, minding my own business. Went over, came one of the lads who was playing football.

And he came to me and he said, we're a goalie down, mate. Would you mind, would you mind coming to help? I was like, there must be a trick here. Would I mind?

I'd love it. He explained that they were desperate and that it was the only position on the field that I didn't totally suck at. So with his words of enthusiastic encouragement ringing in my ears, I leapt up, I rushed over, and I joined in.

And it was rough football. The tackles were hard and heavy. The shots were powerful. But I was standing my ground. I was doing all right. But then, down the centre of the field came James Stone.

[4 : 20] He was about eight foot tall, really lanky, running like that. And he had one aim, and that was to score. I could see it, the look in his eye. And he was drawing closer and closer, and he got to the edge of the penalty area, and he launched a fantastic shot, really powerful, into the top left-hand corner.

And I leapt in the air with all my might. My gloved hand was outstretched, reaching for the ball. And I just managed to push it over the crossbar.

Yes! My team went wild. Hair was ruffled. Manly punches were given. Stoney looked like he was going to kill me. And Moisey, Danny Moise, came up to me and said, Simsie, we're so glad you're on the team.

I was accepted. I was included. And I can genuinely still remember that feeling 16 years on. And that gives us an insight into how significant it is to feel included.

Into how it hurts us when we feel that we're left out. Into how important it is for us to feel part of a team, part of a family, part of a group of people.

[5 : 34] And I think in today's reading from Acts 11, we kind of get a sense of Peter realizing that with his vision. He realizes how important God's sense of inclusion is.

That God doesn't mean anyone to be left out or to be last. God doesn't make any distinctions in his society. Peter has this vision that cements in his mind that in the family of God there's no place for social snobbery.

Or for nationalism or racism or sexism. All are welcome. All are welcome in the Christian community. None are ignored to be picked out last.

None are not good enough to be welcomed into the family of God. A family under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And so we read in Acts 11, Peter having this vision.

And he's explaining this vision to some Jewish believers. These Jewish believers were moaning at him because they'd been associated with Gentiles. That means believers that weren't Jewish.

[6 : 42] They hadn't followed all the Jewish laws. And he'd gone to eat with them and spend some time with them. And they weren't happy with this. This went against the Jewish purity laws that they held quite dear.

And so Peter's response to these Jewish believers having a go at him is to regale this vision that he has. Which is quite a wacky vision really isn't it?

This blanket or sheet being lowered. And lots of different animals being on this sheet. And this voice saying kill them. Eat them. And Peter's saying no lord. No I'm a good Jew.

I stick to the rules. I know that these animals are unpure. They're unclean. I can't eat them. And God says don't call anything impure that God has made clean.

And this happens a second time. And the same thing happens a third time. God's really pushing the point home to Peter. And if we put this vision that Peter had in context briefly.

[7 : 42] We get a bit more of its depth. If we just look at this passage on its own. It's quite useful. But it's a bit like watching a 20 minute clip of the Lord of the Rings film. We kind of might get the gist of it.

And who the ugly bad guys are. And who the little good guys are. But we only get the real gist of it when we watch all 8 million films back to back. That's when we start to get our head around it.

So if we go back to Acts 10. We hear this same vision again. It's exactly the same vision. But we hear of it as it happens. One of my pastor friends once said to me.

If God repeats himself in his word. Maybe he's trying to make a point. And within two chapters. We have the same thing happening six times. God's saying don't call anything impure.

That I have made clean. And so Peter is using this vision to persuade the Jewish believers. That it's okay to be accepting of Gentile believers.

[8 : 38] And in the church at that time. That was a big debate. That was the big argument of the day. What do we do with these Gentile believers. Who are new to faith in Jesus.

And haven't kept all the purity laws. They're not circumcised. And how do we kind of relate as Jewish believers. Who have come to faith in Jesus. What do we do? Do we talk to them?

Can we be friends with them but not eat with them? Can we eat with them but in a different house? How does it work? And despite Peter here trying to sort the situation out.

It doesn't really get sorted actually. When Paul writes to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 10. Paul is addressing exactly the same issue.

He's writing to the church in Corinth. Which is made up of mainly we think ex-pagan Gentiles. But there are some Jewish believers there. And they're having a bit of an argument. What do we do? [9 : 32] Do we talk to them? Can we be nice to them? Do they have to get circumcised? If not why are we? That's not fair. And Paul turns around and doesn't really. As Paul often does. Doesn't really address the issue.

But just kind of drops a bit of a grenade in. And says. Don't be ignorant. That our ancestors were all under the cloud. They passed through the sea. They were baptised into Moses.

They ate the same spiritual food. So basically Paul turns around and gives them a history lesson. He gives them a history lesson that would have been really well known by the Jewish believers. But the Gentile believers probably wouldn't have known it. Paul says. I do not want you to be unaware that our ancestors. Our ancestors.

These are even the ancestors of the Gentiles. Those people that were nothing to do with God until maybe a couple of years ago came into faith in Christ. And Paul is saying. They are our ancestors.

[10 : 32] Paul is you know the Jew of the Jews. He knows what he's on about. And he is here stating calmly. That the Israelite ancestors are the ancestors of the whole church in Corinth.

That the God of the Exodus is the God of the church in Corinth. And that's one of the main things I think we need to get our heads around. If we want to be a church that's inclusive.

Is to first of all realise that we are included. We are welcomed in. We are accepted into God's history. Here is Paul saying.

Look guys. Your history matters. You might be unaware that it's your history. But it is your history. Your God has been at work throughout history. From creation.

And now that history is yours. You can learn from your own history. We are included my friends this morning. I am included. The God that I come to worship.

[11 : 27] To adore this morning. Is the same God that brought the Israelites through the Red Sea. That brought them through the desert. The same God that punished idolatry. The same God that promised blessing.

The same God that never left his people. It's amazing that as followers of Jesus Christ this morning. God has chosen me.

And God has chosen you to be holy. To be blameless. We were predestined from the beginning of time to be adopted as his children. Ephesians says that.

We were chosen to be adopted into his family. We've been brought near to God. Seated in heavenly places with him. You might not feel this morning that you're seated in heavenly places. But we are. We're seated in heavenly places with him. I am included. You are included. And that's a real challenge maybe. To really grasp that.

[12 : 24] To really grasp this morning that your inclusion in the household of God. You are included. You are included. And once we realise what it means to be accepted.

To be included by God. We want to tell people about that don't we? We want to go and invite others in. To be included in that family. And that's what happened in Acts 11. These Jewish believers that were really kind of quite anti this vision.

And weren't too sure about it. At the end of this vision. They had no further objections. They praised God and said even to the Gentiles. Even to them. Even to the Gentiles.

God has granted repentance that leads to life. So these Jewish believers. Although probably quite uncomfortable with what God was doing. God was probably pushing them out of their comfort zone. They were able to give him glory. To say you are good. Because people from outside of our group. Our comfort zone. Are coming to know you as Lord. And the difficult thing is that acceptance doesn't mean anything goes.

[13 : 31] I think maybe in today's society. We think that to accept people as they are. Means to say that whatever you do is okay. And actually we don't read that in Acts 11.

Acceptance doesn't mean that we don't challenge sinful lifestyle choices. That go against scripture. It doesn't mean we don't ask hard questions. It doesn't mean that we back down in our belief. That Jesus Christ is the only Lord.

The way. The truth. And the life. In fact this whole story is how Peter. Comes to a guy called Cornelius. And in chapter 10 we read that Cornelius. Is a pretty good guy.

He's got life sorted. He's devout. He's sincere. But he wasn't saved. He didn't know the gospel. And despite being a good guy. Despite having good morals.

And a solid lifestyle. He still needed to hear the message. That Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And that's the second challenge for me.

[14:28] And for you this morning. That to realise that if we want to include others. We have to go out and invite them. We'll need to invite them into a family. Which unconditionally loves them.

But also models what it means. To be a follower of Jesus. And to encourage them to join us. You see if we think back to my story. About playing football.

With those year nine lads. If they had invited me in. And then kind of watered down their game a bit. And not played as well. And kind of been a bit soft on me. I wouldn't have felt really included.

I wouldn't have felt included in that game. I wouldn't have felt like I truly shared in that game of football. And I think that's kind of the same. When we invite people into the family of God.

Others that we might find difficult to talk to. Others that we kind of cross the street. So they don't see us. And don't engage us in conversation. Others who make us uncomfortable.

[15:27] And even those who. If we're honest. Even though they're not following Jesus. Deep down we might think. Oh but they're doing alright. They're doing alright. They're good guys. They've got good morals. They've got good lifestyles.

We don't need to tell them about Jesus. But this story. Challenges us. Otherwise. You see Romans 3. And we heard that in our testimony. Romans 3.23.

Has these really tough words. That we all. Have sinned. We've all missed the mark. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. But the good news is that we're justified freely. By Jesus Christ.

And this compels us to join in with Peter. And say God doesn't show favoritism. That everyone who believes in him. Receives forgiveness of sin. And I wonder who God is challenging me.

And challenging you. To invite this morning. I wonder if there's someone that you've written off.

They'll never come to faith in Jesus. They're too far gone. Or maybe it's the other way.

[16:26] They're good guys. They don't need to hear all this Christian stuff. They've got it sorted. But that's not what Acts 11. Challenges us to do.

So we're challenged to be included. And to know we're included. We're challenged to go out. And invite other people to be included. And our final challenge. Is that once we've realized all that.

To totally rely. On the Holy Spirit. In chapter 10 of Acts. We read Peter saying. That God anointed Jesus of Nazareth. With Holy Spirit. And power. And he went around doing good.

And healing all. Who were afflicted. Under the power of the devil. And earlier in Acts 2. It was the Holy Spirit. Which enabled the early believers. To speak in tongues.

And that enabled other people. To hear the gospel. And be included. In Acts 7. We read the amazing story of Peter. I'm sorry. Of Stephen. Who was full of the Holy Spirit.

[17:21] Who tries to include. The Sanogen. He says look. Jesus Christ is Lord. I can see his glory. In Acts 9. The Holy Spirit led Paul.

To be dramatically converted. In Acts 14. We hear of the same Paul. With Barnabas. Being sent on the way. By the Holy Spirit. Without asking him.

The Holy Spirit. To guide us. To prompt us. We're not going to be as effective. As we could be. In inviting others. To be included. I know that when I rely. On my own good ideas.

And my own wisdom. It tends to fall flat. On its face. I can remember some friends of ours. Who heard an amazing sermon. It wasn't mine. An amazing sermon.

About lifestyle evangelism. Yes. Sounds good. And so they had a great idea. They thought. I know. We'll invite our neighbours round. For dinner. Friday night. They're not Christians. We are.

[18:17] We'll invite them round. Boom. What could go wrong? They've got two little children.

What could go wrong? So they invited. These neighbours round. And they thought. I know. We'll get one of our little boys.

To say. Grace. We want to show our neighbours. That we've got good Christian values. In this home. So the mum said. To little five year old. Johnny. Johnny. Would you mind. Sharing grace with us.

Before we start. Would you give thanks for us? Johnny was a little bit shy. And he said. Mummy. I don't really. I don't really know what to say. I don't really know how to do it. And mummy said.

Don't worry Johnny. Just say what daddy said. At breakfast. This morning. The little boy is very well behaved. Very obedient. So he thinks. Okay.

Not sure this will work. But okay mummy. So the little boy obediently repeated. Oh God. We've got those awful neighbours coming to dinner tonight. I hope they don't stay too long.

[19 : 11] Amen. Relying on our own wisdom. Doesn't always work. Does it? And you know. I'm a huge fan of Alpha. I'm a huge fan of healing on the streets.

Where we go out. And we pray for people. I'm a huge fan of door to door evangelism. And all that stuff that works. But I wonder if sometimes. We try and over complicate it. And actually.

To include other people. I think they just need to see. An authentic faith. In Jesus Christ. An authentic faith. That like we read in Acts 11. That Peter had.

That he was challenged by God. And he was open with that. I think that's what people. Are crying out for. A faith that can struggle. With God challenging us. A faith that can sometimes.

Need the Lord to repeat himself. Once. And twice. And a third time. Before finally. Maybe. It kind of. Sinks in a bit. I wonder when the last time was.

[20 : 06] That you or I. Asked the Holy Spirit. To direct us. To a person. That needed to hear. That Jesus loves them. It's a real challenge that.

I get home sometimes. And I think. What have I done today. For the kingdom. I haven't told anyone today. That Jesus loves them. And you read Acts. And you see Paul almost doing it. In his sleep.

You know. Walking around. And all this stuff is kicking off. It's a real challenge. Isn't it? But as Christians. It's really important to remember. That we are included. You and I this morning.

No matter how you feel. You are included. In the history. And in the family. Of God. Since the beginning of creation. God loved you. And wanted to adopt you.

Into his family. That was his first choice. And the scripture says. He took joy in doing it. He takes joy. In you joining in. His story. And through being included.

[20 : 59] We're called. To include. Others. Those that we might have. Written off. Those that might be. So different. To us. Those that really challenge us. We're called.

To include them. In the good news. Of Jesus Christ. And we can only do this. Not with our own ideas. Not with our own wisdom. But as with.

Happened with Peter. When the Holy Spirit. Comes in. And gives us. Vision. Of how. To do it. To do it.