

Sunday 17th May 2026 - Values: Inclusion

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Good morning. Good to see you today. And as Helen was saying, we're on week four out of six in this values series. Far from it. Rather, these are aims for who we want to be. Values that we hope God can use to shape what we then do as a church.

So we've explored humility, integrity and kindness so far. And do catch up online with those if you wish. But today it's time to consider the value of inclusion. Inclusion.

Now inclusion, this small word, is a shorthand way of saying that we want St. John's to be a church where everybody is welcomed and included and affirmed regardless of their background, identity or ability.

Inclusion means everyone is invited to participate, to be involved and belong without any hidden agendas. And inclusion means being committed to removing any barriers that get in the way of this participation and of everyone being able to truly belong.

Inclusion, therefore, is a small word, but it's a big, bold, ambitious value. You know, one which, as we'll maybe see this morning, is pretty challenging to uphold.

[1 : 53] But one which is also rooted, as with all these six values that we're looking at, is rooted in the life and person of Jesus. Indeed, let's start with Jesus this morning and we'll branch out from him because in Jesus we see someone who was in the business of breaking down barriers in order that everyone can belong and participate in the fullness of life that God has for us.

It's fair to say a couple of thousand years ago that Jesus lived in a pretty divided society where who's in and who's out, who's included and who's excluded defined so much of everyday life.

So whether it was male or female or slave and free, whether it was Jew or Gentile, clean or unclean, rich or poor, the barriers between people belonging to and participating fully in a united, inclusive community under God were both well known and well established.

For example, there were literal barriers between certain people groups in the temple in Jerusalem. There were dividing walls in that temple complex that dictated who was allowed to go where. So there were restricted areas where only holy priests could go and in the less pure public could not.

[3 : 26] There were courts reserved solely for men where no women were allowed to go. There were whole areas which only Jews could enter and Gentiles, non-Jews, were prohibited from joining them.

Indeed, although the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed maybe 2,000 years ago by the Romans, 150 years ago, archaeologists found a stone inscription from this wall here in the middle of the temple.

And this wall there was a wall that divided the area for Jews from the area for Gentiles, non-Jews. And this inscription that was found, it was written in Greek so that foreigners had no excuse in not understanding it.

Greek, sort of the international language at the time. And this inscription they found contained this warning. It said, Charming, isn't it?

Charming. Yeah. The threat of execution, I would suggest, is not exactly conducive to a good worship experience, is it? But that tone, that was indicative of just how divided and excluding the society in which Jesus lived was.

[5 : 03] And yet conversely, in Jesus, we see someone who came not to divide, but to unite. Not to exclude, but to include.

Indeed, with this temple dividing wall in mind, we read this about Jesus in the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, which is starting at verse 14.

And it's a chunky reading, but I'm going to read it in full today. It says this, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his

household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

As I say, it's a chunky passage, but I think it's pretty amazing the way it's all linking together, outlining the way in which Jesus is the ultimate includer, the one who embraces all people as one, one humanity, one body, one household, one spirit.

[7 : 13] And these verses from Ephesians, well, they reflect, I think, all that we see Jesus doing in the gospel accounts of his life, where he constantly breaks down barriers between people so that all can truly belong.

So, for example, when his own disciples try to exclude children from his presence, Jesus says, no, let the children come to me, don't stop them. An announcement of all age inclusion, as Helen was helped with us think about just now.

When Jesus notices the poor widow giving the little she has to the temple collection, he commends her generosity as a way of championing economic inclusion.

When the hated tax collector Zacchaeus is excluded by the crowds, Jesus makes a point of noticing him, calling him, going to his house for dinner, you know, an assurance of social inclusion.

When Samaritans were excluded by many because they were seen as being racially inferior, Jesus instead tells a parable in which a Samaritan is held up as a timeless example of neighbourly love, a picture of ethnic inclusion.

[8 : 33] When a man with leprosy and a woman with menstrual bleeding are healed of conditions by Jesus that would have excluded them from being able to worship in the temple, it's a demonstration of spiritual inclusion.

When Jesus doesn't condemn the woman caught in adultery, and he befriends the woman at the well with her checkered sexual history, it's a message of inclusion for those who may feel excluded because of their sexual practice.

When women were generally excluded and treated as property, but Jesus teaches Mary as a disciple and chooses Mary Magdalene as the first witness to his resurrection, he's clearly professing gender inclusion.

And when Jesus assures the criminal next to him on the cross of his place with him in paradise, Jesus models eternal inclusion for those who might otherwise fear eternal exclusion.

These ways and more, time and again, Jesus welcomes and affirms people with such diverse backgrounds, identities and abilities that this approach, this value of inclusion, it has to be intentional on his part.

[10 : 00] This is no accident. It's the principle that people are not to be passengers, but participants in this shared life where barriers to belonging are broken down once and for all.

Now, does this inclusion mean that anything goes, though, and how we live doesn't matter? Well, not at all. Because when we look at Jesus, again, his inclusion and affirmation of people doesn't mean he always condones their behavior or fails to call them to repentance for certain things.

But Jesus does seem to know that true transformation only happens through inclusion and within community. because it's only by living alongside each other as equals that we learn how to truly love one another in our differences.

Come and follow me, says Jesus. Follow me. You are in. You're included. You're loved. But now you're in.

Help each other to live in my ways of humility and kindness, of integrity, openness and generosity. Inclusion is the means by which someone becomes more fully the person God has made them to be because we find our true purpose by participating in the body, the community of Christ.

[11 : 36] And yet, sadly, for many people, their experience of church life has not always reflected this value of inclusion where all are welcomed and affirmed.

Indeed, sometimes, sadly, it's been just the opposite of that. For example, and perhaps most obviously, members of the LGBTQ community have routinely felt excluded from churches simply on grounds of their sexuality or gender identity.

So let's talk about this for a minute. Because I know for many people, and perhaps for you, there is the belief that people, for example, in same-sex relationships should be excluded from certain roles of leadership in the church since to be in an active gay relationship is seen as sinful.

And often, there are eight or nine Bible verses that are quoted as being the biblical basis for such exclusion. Now, I haven't got time this morning to unpack the ways in which I think those verses are often misunderstood or misinterpreted.

But if you want to hear my thoughts on that, there is a long talk on our website that I gave about 10 years ago now on human sexuality and how we might better, in my view, understand what the Bible does and doesn't say about that.

[13:15] That's on the church website, and we can give you the link if you'd like to catch up with that. But briefly, though, I want to say this morning, when we use the Bible to condemn same-sex attraction or relationships, I'd say it's a failure to understand the culture and context in which much of this ancient, diverse book that we have in the Bible was written and put together.

For example, it was a time when patriarchy was dominant and men owned women as property. It was a time also when procreation was all important because a people group were trying to establish themselves as a nation and wanted to grow.

And it was also a time when all kinds of often pretty random purity rules were championed as a way to help this new nation carve out a distinct identity for themselves.

In the context of the Bible, if you put patriarchy, procreation, and purity rules in their rightful context, I'd say they're a world away from our modern understanding of gender, sexuality, and of loving, consensual, committed relationships.

[14:44] And as always, you're free, totally, to disagree. But I'd say we're therefore called to affirm the ways in which God's love can be just as present in same-sex relationships as it can be between a man and a woman.

Now, if we'd like to believe that, but are struggling to put it all together, then in my opinion, the best prayer we can pray is to ask for God's love to shape and maybe soften our hearts as a change of heart usually leads to a change of mind.

How might God shape and soften our hearts? Well, I suggest it often comes from inclusion, where we get to know people who we might otherwise not encounter.

We get to know gay people. We welcome and include and affirm them as members of our community so that we can learn from their experience and from their love.

Again, inclusion on grounds of sexuality or relationship status, whether straight, gay, bi, or queer, doesn't mean that anything goes and that every expression of sexual activity is to be condoned.

[16:11] In fact, far from it. Because if we're championing the way in which loving, committed relationships can reflect God's love, then promiscuous or adulterous behavior is failing to reflect God's love.

But wherever possible, and due to pastoral sensitivities, this may not always be possible within a single church community, but wherever possible, working out how to live in God's ways and the transformation that that might require, I'd say happens best when done within a loving community of non-judgmental inclusion.

Thank you. As it says in Proverbs, as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. And I'd say we can best discern, wrestle with, and work out how to live in line with God's ways when we all participate in that process together.

What else? Well, another example. For those who have gone through divorce, and I know there are many here whose experience is just that.

There are many who have gone through divorce, though, who can still feel and face exclusion in today's wider church. For example, Laura, a curate, who has shared up here about being divorced, was telling me about a church not too far from here, where the vicar told her that he didn't think divorced people were credible in ordained ministry, even if their divorce happened through no fault of their own.

[18:09] lacked credibility, he said. Now that's something which in principle and in practice, I, and I hope all of us, would totally reject, and which therefore makes me rejoice, that we have people like Laura and Kim as divorced and ordained people serving in this church.

Because for me, their experience of and their empathy with and for divorce doesn't detract, but instead adds credibility to their ministry.

Equally, there are many churches and clergy, such as in a neighboring parish to ours, who still to this day, in 2026, reject the idea that women can be in roles of church leadership.

In my view, it's misogyny dressed up as theology, and I am just so tired of the way it's indulged and accepted in this diocese and beyond.

Now these three things, sexuality, divorce, gender, all ways and more that people sadly experience exclusion in church life.

[19 : 31] And yet, while this exclusion can be incredibly damaging for them as individuals concerned, it also diminishes our shared life because we miss out on all of the gifts, the wisdom, the joy, and the experience that these people could otherwise bring with them.

Indeed, sometimes, we can't even imagine how different our shared life could be if we included those who we were perhaps most dubious about or even in some ways afraid of.

But if inclusion is at the heart of the way of Jesus, which I believe it is, then it shouldn't surprise us that embracing inclusion will bring blessings to our shared life in the most unexpected of ways.

For example, by way of a somewhat quirky illustration this morning, I want to show a video in a second about Yellowstone National Park in America and the way in which the reintroduction and inclusion of wolves in the park led to a positive transformation that would barely have been imaginable beforehand.

So, see what you make of this. Before the wolves turned up, they'd been absent for 70 years. But the numbers of deer, because there was nothing to hunt them, had built up and built up in the Yellowstone Park.

[21 : 03] And despite efforts by humans to control them, they'd managed to reduce much of the vegetation there to almost nothing. They'd just grazed it away. But as soon as the wolves arrived, even though they were few in number, they started to have the most remarkable effects.

First, of course, they killed some of the deer, but that wasn't the major thing. Much more significantly, they radically changed the behaviour of the deer. The deer started avoiding certain parts of the park, the places where they could be trapped most easily, particularly the valleys and the gorges.

And immediately, those places started to regenerate. In some areas, the height of the trees quintupled in just six years. Bare valley sides quickly became forests of aspen and willow and cottonwood.

And as soon as that happened, the birds started moving in. The number of songbirds and migratory birds started to increase greatly. The number of beavers started to increase because beavers liked to eat the trees.

And beavers, like wolves, are ecosystem engineers. They create niches for other species. And the dams they built in the rivers provided habitats for otters and muskrats and ducks and fish and reptiles and amphibians.

[22 : 21] The wolves killed coyotes. And as a result of that, the number of rabbits and mice began to rise, which meant more hawks, more weasels, more foxes, more badgers.

Ravens and bald eagles came down to feed on the carrion that the wolves had left. Bears fed on it too, and their population began to rise as well, partly also because there were more berries growing on the regenerating shrubs.

And the bears reinforced the impact of the wolves by killing some of the calves of the deer. But here's where it gets really interesting. The wolves changed the behaviour of the rivers.

They began to meander less. There was less erosion. The channels narrowed. More pools formed. More riffle sections, all of which were great for wildlife habitats. The rivers changed in response to the wolves.

And the reason was that the regenerating forests stabilised the banks so that they collapsed less often, so that the rivers became more fixed in their course.

[23 : 28] Similarly, by driving the deer out of some places and the vegetation recovering on the valley sides, there was a soil erosion because the vegetation stabilised that as well.

So the wolves, small in number, transform not just the ecosystem of the Yellowstone National Park, this huge area of land, but also its physical geography.

It's fascinating stuff, I think. And it's obviously not a perfect analogy, all right? So we won't take it to its nth degree. But just as the inclusion of a handful of wolves transformed and improved the whole life of Yellowstone National Park itself, so too I'd suggest that if we truly embrace inclusion as a value for our church life, we will be blessed, and I would say improved, in ways that we haven't yet been able to imagine.

And so that's why, for example, our PCC, you know, the elected trustees of the church, have recently and unanimously signed us up to become members of a network called Inclusive Church. Their statement of belief, which we've been happy to identify with, says this. It says, we believe in inclusive church. A church which celebrates and affirms every person and does not discriminate.

[25 : 00] We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality.

We believe in a church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ, which is scripturally faithful, which seeks to proclaim the gospel afresh for each generation, and in which in the power of the Holy Spirit allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.

As I say, we as a PCC, me as vicar, we're very happy to align ourselves with this statement. But in doing so, we're fully aware of how demanding this aspiration of full inclusion really is, because it goes way beyond and is far broader than simply being about whether we're inclusive or affirming of those from our LGBT community.

What's more, any challenge to the wider church needs to begin with ourselves, as we are first and foremost called to consider how inclusive or not we really are.

For example, at a PCC meeting just on Monday this week, and we were discussing the way in which our toilets, in particular our accessible toilets, really are no longer fit for purpose, since there's not enough of a turning circle for wheelchairs in the cubicle, and the position of the toilet itself makes it almost impossible a transfer to and from a wheelchair.

[26 : 58] And that's not inclusive of people with disabilities who need accessible toilets. And so in response to that, and in light of this aspiration to have inclusion as one of our key values, we've begun the process of getting quotes to knock the existing three toilets that are out in the foyer into two larger accessible toilets.

So yes, we'll lose a toilet, but we'll gain two fully accessible toilets, which are suitable for disabled use, and with baby change facilities in each of them, and so on.

And that's the right thing to do, in order to become more inclusive of those living with disabilities. Indeed, on this, yes, we've got a pretty modern building, and it's reasonably accessible for those in wheelchairs, but probably not enough, because, you know, there's this step here, so anyone in a chair can't get up to this little short platform here.

There's a step up to where the band play, so again, that means it's not accessible. And the fact that our front doors, our internal doors, can't easily be opened by a wheelchair user, you know, these and other factors, I mean, we're not as inclusive of disability as we'd like to be, and that's not a great situation, if we believe we're called to follow the inclusive example of Jesus.

In fact, the more we think about inclusion as a value, the more challenging it becomes, because if we were to assess how accessible our shared life, or our services are, for those who are, say, neurodiverse, or live with dementia, or social anxiety, or blindness, or hearing loss, or a learning disability, you know, we've got a long way to go before we can genuinely call ourselves a fully inclusive church.

[29 : 04] For example, we don't offer sign language in our services, primarily because I don't think we have any profoundly deaf people in our congregation, but I suspect we don't have any profoundly deaf people in our congregation because we don't offer signing.

Equally, I know how overwhelming it can sometimes be for people with social anxiety to come along to a Sunday morning service here with the numbers we have, and there's therefore a need for us to think more creatively and sensitively about how we can welcome, include, and affirm those who live with that reality.

You know, that's not meant to depress us. It's meant to challenge us, and challenge me as vicar, because part of loving our neighbour as ourselves is that we want to ensure that everyone feels welcomed, included, affirmed, and encouraged to participate as fully as they'd like to in our church life.

The good news, I think, is that there is much that I think we're on the right track with. You know, for example, I genuinely think we're more of a single, friendly church than we used to be, and many of our activities and much of our focus is on ensuring that single people are as central to our shared life as those who might be in couples or families.

There's still work to do on this, I'm sure, but we're better than we were, say, 10 years ago. Equally, we've done our best and do our best to welcome, include, and affirm those who've joined us in recent years from Hong Kong.

[30 : 50] And while it's an ongoing process and it's a work in progress, I think the mutual efforts that we're making to integrate with one another and include one another, they're appreciated by all.

And I know, I know I speak for so many of us when I say what a blessing the inclusion of those who have moved here from Hong Kong continues to be for our church and our community life as a whole.

But yes, we're a work in progress, always will be. So do please come and have a chat with me or anyone on the PCC if there are things that you're aware of or experience that you think actually we could do more on that to become more inclusive.

However, I very much want this to be an ongoing conversation and value for us because a bit like with Yellowstone, the rewards and the blessings that inclusivity brings, they're worth it.

so just as Jesus calls us to follow him one step at a time, my prayer and my hope is that we can make steady, sure progress in making this value of inclusion more of a lived reality in our church life.

[32 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen.