

## **Reaching Out - Including Those Who May Be Marginalised**

**A talk by** Jean Willson on 14 August 2022

When the death of a loved-one becomes a life changing event, often people find their way through the doors of St. Luke's church.

This happened to me nine years ago in October 2013, when I thought I would just 'pop down' and give a cheque to the vicar, just before his service. However, Dave persuaded me to stay for the service as he told me his talk was all about Victoria, my daughter, whose funeral he had taken on the Friday. In trepidation, I stayed and Dave talked so eloquently about Victoria and my family and said "Her family is one of the most Christian families I have ever come across"

This was news to me, as God had never been part of my life.

So let me explain, our much-loved daughter Victoria was born with profound learning disabilities, with a degenerative condition that would mean she would need total support all her life.

As Victoria grew, and it became obvious that she was quite different and did not behave like others, and we gradually became marginalised. It was through her eyes and behind her wheelchair,

through fear and ignorance, we often experienced prejudice and discrimination.

**Nothing in the world is more painful than rejection.**

At every stage, we then learnt that we had to fight. Fight for her life, fight for every test, treatment, or operation, fight for education and access to therapy. Then fight to be welcomed and accepted, and then finally fight to belong.

But we survived, and through my experiences of the injustices Victoria experienced, I went onto become as Desmond Tutu said an Agent for Change, and the rest, as they say is history.

Victoria and I went on to lead campaigns for social justice for people with learning disabilities and their families. Sadly, Victoria died peacefully in her own home aged 43.

So, with this background I found myself sitting through services in this church with rituals that were as alien to me as a foreign language. I was really struggling in that first year of intense bereavement and was at a loss as to how to rebuild my life. But gradually, the music, and the messages of St. Luke's permeated through the thick fog of my grief. Gradually through the rituals, there was an order to things – a calming pattern. Combined with

the welcome of the people of SLC, I found a haven, solace, and an anchor for my grief.

When I look back now, I can see how that healing began to take place. As Martin Wroe told me “A healthy church provides healing”

Being a pragmatic woman, I asked the vicar if I could do some gardening, and he gave us free reign to clear and re-design the gardens of the church. It was here, whilst clearing and planting that I felt closest to Victoria, and my heart began to really heal. I just so love a group, and encouraged volunteers to help me, and it has been an extremely rewarding experience.

I have come to understand and love the traditional rituals and look forward to times like Easter and Christmas. Gradually, I felt a sense of belonging and this was so important to me. I was valued, and wanted to discover more, and in doing so found God.

Listening to people speaking here, often words touch my heart  
The other week with Liz and her ‘Who is holy’ and Ceri telling us to do things with joy, kindness, and love, and this encouraged me to look at the Fruits of the Spirit that Paul the Apostle wrote about to one of the groups trying to follow Jesus. In Galatians 5 22 -23. Paul lists nine specific behaviours – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – that are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life.

So, like a light bulb moment, I finally understood what Dave was on about when he said that me and my family “we were Christians” It was by our deeds and acts in our learning disability community, all the hard work done with love and commitment, living the right way, reaching out and helping others, particularly those people who are marginalised. And the other week, when Lizzie asked who we thought was holy and Martin calling my name saying I was ‘Holy.’ When I asked him why he said that, by looking out for others, reaching out and welcoming.

Thinking about this, coming from a world of rejection, through my daughter’s eyes, I know what it feels like not to have a place, not to be welcomed, not being valued.

So here at St. Luke’s I think about the times Jesus reached out and included all those people who were marginalised because of who and what they were – women, sick and disabled people, people who were different i.e. when he was surrounded by people and felt someone touch him and it was a woman with a blood problem, and he welcomed and healed her.

So, it was a natural thing for me to start and look at who is not being included in our church family, and why I joined St. Luke’s Inclusion Group, and with others with lived experience are working on the practical accessibility of the church and its words. We will

also be looking at our attitudes, culture, and behaviour, because cultural change, inclusion and full participation leads to a sense of belonging

Going back to St. Paul's letter about the Fruits of the Spirit, I like these two

- **Goodness** – is seen in our actions. This word relates to not only being good but also doing good things.
- **Love** – is patient, love is kind. Love is self-sacrifice, putting others needs before our own, following Jesus's example of humbling ourselves as servants. Love rejoices in the truth. It bears all things. Believes all things, endures all things.

Find time in each day to see beauty and love in the world around you. Realize that each has limitless abilities, but each of us is different in our own way. What you may feel you lack in one regard may be more than compensated for in another. What you feel you lack in the present may become your strengths in the future. May you see your future as one filled with promise and possibility.

Learn to view everything as a worthwhile experience.

May you find enough inner strength to determine your own worth by yourself, and not be dependent on others judgement of your accomplishments.

May you always feel LOVED...