

The New Year in Grace

I was a young assistant priest out on a parish visit. The Rector had asked me to get to know Mrs. Jones. She opened the door to my knock and ushered me into the formal dining room of her home. It was 10am and she had set out tea and biscuits (cookies in Canadian). Everything was laid out in precise order. The cups were bone china with delicate designs that matched the saucers, the plates, the tea pot and the milk jug.

I looked at the cups. They were small with tiny handles. I had cycled 3 miles on a hot morning at some speed and needed about a pint of tea!

However, there is a way these things are to be done. We sipped our tea and nibbled our biscuits and said very little of consequence, but politely. I remembered my grandmother's front room. No one ever went into it, and children were utterly forbidden access. It was for visitors. It was a place where things were done with propriety and formal order. It was a cold room.

Unbeknownst to Mrs. Jones, her neighbour had decided to drop in that morning. Mrs. Jones and her neighbour had been friends for ever, and she never knocked at the front, but let herself in through the back. And, of course she let in Tramp, Mrs. Jones' 8 month old puppy. Tramp was unaware of rules of etiquette and rushed to see who the stranger was in the house. Tramp landed on my knee, knocking the cup from my hand and bashing the table so hard that everything was suddenly at risk. Mrs. Jones shouted, the neighbour cried out, the dog thought it was a great game.

Half an hour later we were all in the kitchen having salvaged much from the wreckage of the dining room. We had mugs of tea and Tramp had established that life had returned to a relaxed normal. I heard about Tramp's arrival, about the death of Betty's (Mrs. Jones') husband, and how she and Enid had met at school 60 years earlier. I heard about how she prayed each night and again before breakfast, and how she saw those prayers answered. We had become friends as well as priest/parishioner.

If Jesus were to come to your house, what would you give him? Tea, coffee, beer?

Which room would you sit him down in? Why?

What are the rules for receiving a first time visitor? Why?

Rules matter, and they are there to help things move along when we are not sure just how to do it without thinking. We have rules about being with God too. Rules are helpful, and good rules keep you safe and everyone else too.

But you have to keep asking yourself if the rules are working. Are they helping you to get what you want? Does a formal tea help you get to know someone?

There was a time when these were fun events and everyone knew they were playing a kind of game with their neighbours. But since Victorian times have ebbed away I think the British tea ceremony actually gets in the way a bit.

The Gospel today is all about questioning rules, rituals and guidelines. Good public health rules about hand washing are good. But what are they for? They help reduce sickness, but they don't tell you anything about a person's relationship with God. Jesus, as he so often does, turns the rules upside down to see what is in them and what they are for, and if they get in the way. Then

he says to the Pharisees, "If you want to know about spiritual cleanliness, don't look at what someone eats, but what comes out of their mouth. You are looking at the wrong end!"

We have rules and rituals in Church. We are Anglicans, and we still have a degree of formality when we meet which comes from the Victorian Church of England. There are things one is *supposed* to do in church on a Sunday. There should be a creed recited, at least 4 hymns (sung slowly and solemnly), three readings (regardless of whether anyone can make sense of them all), this, that and the other. These have, in the past, all been helpful and fun. Jesus would ask you, "What did they help you do?"

Well, why do we come to Church to worship?

We come to the house of God, in the presence of our brothers and sisters in Christ, to listen for what God wants to say to each of us, we come to tell God of our needs and hopes, our concerns and our longings, we come to give thanks and we come to give God glory and praise and worship.

"So," Jesus might continue, "Do the old rules and rituals work for those who are looking for God today? Does singing the Creed open your heart to me? Does this, or that or the other make a straight and clear pathway for God into the heart of the stranger who stands amongst you?"

I, like most of you, am a traditional Anglican. The old stuff worked for me! It still does. But is it my job to keep myself comfortable, or is it my job to be attentive to how we re-arrange things so that they will be comfortable to the person who walks in off the street?

It was, in a way, God who opened the door to let Tramp come careening into the formal tea and biscuits. Without Tramp I would never have made friends with Betty. Mugs in a kitchen work better for making friendships.

Slowly the Anglican church is loosening up, revving up, lightening up. At Grace Church we have a rare chance experiment in the next 12 months or so with new ways of doing the rituals and rules of church. It is upsetting to let go of the old rituals. They take on a life of their own. But Jesus, like Tramp, always upsets the rituals that have become something in themselves, and says, "Remember! Think what you were doing this for!" Mugs in the kitchen lacks awe and majesty, it is true. But then, who wants to live with awe and majesty, when you could live with the one who invites us to call him Abba, Poppa?

The bulletin today outlines some of what we are planning for the life of the church in the remains of the year. A monthly "contemporary service", a collective way of designing some of our major services, more members of the church taking leadership in the worship, looking at the way we support the costs of the church. All of these, and more, flow out of trying to honour Jesus' teaching that we need to remember the spirituality of why we do things, and then to do them in ways that will work today. We need to be faithful, more than we need to be obedient, and that will be hard work.

When you get home, read the Gospel again, and talk about it with the people around you. Talk at Coffee hour. Think, then pray, then act. And remember, the disasters are often Jesus (like Tramp) knocking things over to let us start again from scratch.