

Kids

[Aim: to examine some rural preconceptions and attitudes about life in the city]

Story

A rural village community arranged to accommodate a visit from a group of primary age schoolchildren from South East inner city London. The trip was intended to give city children a chance to visit a working farm, to have some exposure to the "countryside" and a chance to meet people living in a rural environment. It was seen as a charitable (and missionary) event. It was arranged by the minister in conjunction with the church council.

At the meeting of the village church's council, the following concerns were noted:

the church should be safeguarded against vandalism and graffiti as it was possible the teachers would have no control over the children (and so many children all at once);

someone would have to volunteer to be in the church to guard against possible pilfering of eg books and inappropriate behaviour in church (eg spitting and swearing)

someone would have to provide the teachers with a list of "don'ts" and stay with them to make sure they didn't allow the children to run riot on the farm;

there would have to be a notice in the village newspaper about possible noise and nuisance to villagers on the day of the visit.

Another question which arose was: would there need to be translators for non-English speaking children? Another member of the church council then exhorted other members to remember that these were "deprived" children, many without one or other parent, many black or Asian and who deserved Christian love and compassion.

The visit took place without incident and a polite letter of thanks from the children was afterwards received. The subsequent church council meeting noted: the visit had been a success and the children had so obviously benefited, another group could be invited next year. The coach was too big for country lanes and had got stuck on the bridge. The school should be asked to use minibuses instead. The children were remarkably well behaved and there had been fewer black and Asian children than expected. There were no language difficulties. It had been a good idea to have a structured programme during which the children were fully occupied. Perhaps the village should provide more food next time as the children had seemed very hungry.

Discussion

In this story we can see that the rural/urban divide can be prejudiced in both directions. As a wealthy community, the rural community felt a duty to those it designated "deprived" to share something of itself. This "deprivation" was to be addressed as "hospitality" and seen as a missionary

endeavour. This hospitality was then to be marked by the absorption of disruption, nuisance and possibly even damage. These negative effects were discussed and publicised in advance, colouring the whole visit. There was no suggestion that the children might "bring" anything to the village, or that anything was to be learned by encounter with them. Indeed the whole process was seen as the strong providing largesse to the weak at some cost to the ordered lives of the strong. Even after the visit had taken place and none of the worst fears had been realised, the church council still discussed what had happened in terms of problems avoided and of ministering to the deprived. The lack of problems was a pleasant (and perhaps lucky) surprise.

To reflect theologically on this, we need to look at the theology of encounter and at what missionary hospitality really means. Encounter involves risk-taking - a risk that we ourselves will be changed and challenged by the unfamiliar and the strange. Hospitality involves opening ourselves up to the unexpected and making available every part of what is ours to give. This may prove uncomfortable, especially if we already have fixed ideas about what "others" look, sound and behave like. People shook their heads at Jesus's dining with outcasts and sinners. Those people would have been more discriminating about those to whom they offered hospitality and those from whom they would expect it. But Jesus made it clear that all kinds of pre-formed opinion and prejudice create obstacles for the realisation of God's Kingdom.

Some ideas for Bible Study:

Genesis 18: 1-8

Matthew 7: 1-5

Luke 14: 12-14

Choose one or two questions for discussion:

Where do our preconceptions come from? From newspapers, TV, cinema, things our parents said? Somewhere else?

Have you ever met someone and disliked them on sight, only to find over time that you became best of friends? What happened?

Is it true that we sometimes know what's best for young people? Say why it is or it isn't.

Possibilities for drama and role play

**What would you have said to welcome the children if you were the minister?
Or if you were the churchwarden, or steward?**

What would the teacher have told the children to prepare them for the visit?

How do you think the teacher/children might have reported the visit back home?

Reflection

We often make judgements which are ill-founded or ill-advised on the basis of what we think we know. Jesus warns us against this on several occasions. It is a mission task to approach every encounter as an occasion when God can use us to witness to the inclusiveness of the Kingdom. What can we do to make this a reality?

A Hymn and a Prayer

**For example, *The King of love my Shepherd is*
or *Do not be afraid***

God,

You welcomed children into your presence.

You said that we must learn to be like them

to come into your Kingdom.

May we always be your children.

Amen

