

LEAD ON

INTERCULTURAL CHURCH, A LESSON IN OBEDIENCE

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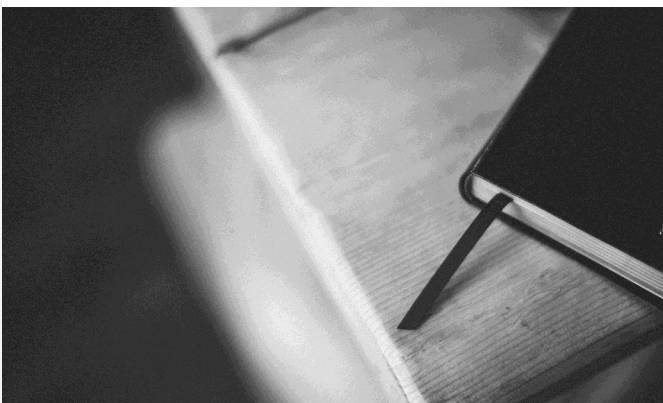
ST. JAMES

St. James is a relatively small church in west London. The predominant languages in our parish are Gujarati or Tamil, and there is very little connection with the wider context of London.

Historically St. James had four congregations that spoke three different languages and covered four different traditions throughout the day. This pattern has been in place for many years, but now we meet once, all together. We have found that by relying on the prompting of God we have been able to be far more creative in hearing and attending to our own particular call as the church in Alperton. It has been an enormous and costly journey, marked and focused by our conviction that 'God has no favourites' (Acts 10:34).

FROM THERE TO HERE

Obedience is a word that often takes people back to their childhood, invoking feelings of dread involving punishment for disobedience and notions of behaviour stripped of meaning except for the need to comply. But obedience in relationship with God is different. God has been so gracious to us, teaching us slowly about his purposes for us. He asked us 'Can I shape you?' (Jeremiah 18), and has walked with us through the



whole process. He is a God who speaks and to whom we respond, and this is at the centre of our obedience as a community of faith.

Our journey started by asking people if they had pictures they wanted to share and asking visiting preachers to pray for us. We listened to the language they used and the pictures they described as they prayed about our situation. As we wrote these down, we started to see links between them.

As we shared, more people came forward with their prayers for St. James, and it seemed natural not only to collect and test these pictures, but to try and see if we could put them into practice.

What else could we do? When the God of creation suggests that when we move, we must move slowly and all together, we listen to each other and try and slow down.

TRIANGLE

One elderly lady had a practice of writing down all the pieces she knew of St. James and setting them out before her on the table, she would then ask God to show her what he wanted her to pray for. She noticed that a symbol for Trinity was a triangle, with Father Son and Holy Spirit taking up the three sides.

She then noticed that at St. James we had three main languages, English, Tamil and Hindi. However, where the lines on the Trinity triangle were of equal length, the lines on the St. James triangle were skewed. The English side was too long and the Tamil and Hindi sides too short. She suggested that if we at St. James were to truly be a sign of the kingdom of God, the sides needed to be rebalanced.

TRINITY

So believing that God is a close God who speaks to his church we began researching everything we could about the Trinity; the inner workings of the Godhead and the overflow of love in mission and creation.

As we explored this theme as a PCC, a wonderful French lady pushed us further than we as the vicars would have dared to go. 'It is not enough to tolerate one another, it is not enough to love one another, we must glorify one another!'

At the time the different communities would make room for one another, and we grudgingly tried to host one another a few times during the year, but what this lady suggested was more than we would have thought possible.

In essence, it seemed as if God was asking us to value each other to the extent that we wanted the English community to be free to be English – to teach us how to make English food, to share English customs; our Caribbean community to bring the whole of themselves to church; and the Tamil community to be even more Tamil – teaching us songs and inviting us into their trials and celebrations, and the same for the Hindi speakers.

We were being invited to be so other-centric that we forgot to defend ourselves from one another; to be so focused on Jesus that fear of missing out or becoming less loosed it grip on us.

Malcolm Patten in his book *Leading Multi-cultural Church* calls this a total 'shift in mindset'. We need to be

converted again from thinking that being saved, or being Christian is all about us. God turns us around and shows us that being Christian is about him. His glory, his love, his grace, his Church.

Church is not about getting what we need, it is about being part of something so much bigger than ourselves. Something so much more beautiful. Beautiful but uncomfortable. In 1 John 1:16 we read 'We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.'

TROUBLE

Trouble really came at Christmas.

Previously we had celebrated Christmas with a Tamil Christmas celebration, a Hindi celebration, an 'International Carol service' in English, and carols by candlelight. The services negotiated over the church space. Treating each community equally meant the vicars effectively ran three different Christmases as community members never went to each other's celebrations.

When it is dark and cold there is nothing better than the familiar sound of the songs you have been waiting all year to sing, listening to the old story simply read in the language you are used to.

But we were called to be more, called to love our neighbour as ourselves. We discovered we had assumptions around a single language community being more missional, but this is not biblical. Jesus clearly tells his disciples that when they love one



another the world will recognise that they follow Jesus (John 13:34-35).

Our role as vicars became heart-breaking.

We had to remind people that we were called to be one (John 17) as God is Trinity, each part distinctly different and yet completely together. We needed to reflect that oneness, especially in our celebrating and grieving.

So Christmas has become a huge celebration. Alongside our more 'normal' Christingle, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations we created our 'Christmas knees-up' (we might want to work on the name). This is a service where different families or activities share what they have been up to.

A family might sing a song; maybe the young people do a drama. Someone can read a poem; we'll learn a new song in Hindi. The children will tell the Christmas story or sing a song. The knitters will show off a blanket and the people who have learnt how to play guitar will play a new song. We will sing a carol from some of our backgrounds translating where we can. We read the Bible and listen to a short talk. We try to keep it to an hour. It is joy filled and wonderful.

Then we eat together, and it is beautiful. It is not very English, and I imagine some thinking 'Oh how cringe', however we have learnt from our brothers and our sisters from different parts of the world, we have given up our preferences, given room for people to be heard, all in response to what God asked us to do. We are so grateful.

CHALLENGING COMFORT

Has becoming an intercultural church community been comfortable? No. But Jesus never offers us a comfortable life. He tells us to pick up our cross, to lose our lives, not to look back. Why should our expression of this faith when we come together be comfortable?

A Tamil lady recently told me that while we were praying God spoke to her and said that 'Jesus didn't just die for Tamils'.

Ethnocentrism is rife, where we believe that Christianity or the world has a centre, and the centre happens to be where we are. Or when we believe that the God of the world is only found in people like us, or for people like us.

Mostly this is unconscious, we just haven't seen the world standing from a different place. But God is so much bigger, kinder and more. He asks us to be the same. We ask questions of each other because we cannot possibly know everything ourselves.

At St. James our journey into obedience has been a season where we have learnt to listen more keenly to the promptings of Holy Spirit. We have been led into a place which we first called our 'Common Service'. We didn't have another word for what God was doing in and through us, but intercultural seems to fit where we find ourselves today. We are not done yet though and we keep trying to be alive to God's prompting in us as we develop to include and welcome everyone we meet.

It's been good for us as leaders to ask how much power and control we hold onto? How much attention do we give to ideas that come from other places? Could we learn and listen to the communities represented in our church?

As leaders in our church it's been good to be reminded that the church is not about us. We know we know this, it's an old truth, and yet we keep having to remember it. Leadership is about listening to God and his people, it is about holding his people to the words he has given them. Maybe we are midwives, holding the hand of the church and whispering truth as God brings new life.

