

## The power of tea and coffee!

For my text this morning I take 1 Corinthians 11.4.

“Any man who prays or proclaims God’s message in public worship with his head covered disgraces Christ”.

Now I choose this passage for us to consider today, not because I want to talk about the rights and wrongs of hat wearing in church.

But rather I choose this passage to illustrate the point that even the great St Paul, who in his first letter to the Corinthians spoke about such lofty subjects as communion and the nature of the resurrection, did not think it too small a thing to talk about appropriate headwear for church.

Why did St Paul ‘waste’ valuable ink on such trivialities?

I imagine the answer was twofold:

Firstly that small niggles have a habit of getting blown out of all proportion and causing far much more damage than they should; whilst on the other hand small acts of kindness can have a disproportionately positive effect.

Secondly, small things can often highlight important theological points.

This morning, then, I wanted to talk not about one of the great themes of Christian doctrine, but rather about how we share tea and coffee after church services here in Farningham!

A few months ago, as we shared tea and coffee after the service, we had a few near misses. One or two children running around; some older people with dodgy hips; hot drinks...

So we tried something new: asking the children to stay in the small children’s area at the back of church during tea and coffee time.

It seemed like an obvious solution: the children are safe from spillages of hot drinks, and older people are kept safe from fast moving children.

But this has had some unforeseen consequences.

The children have felt excluded from the rest of the church family.

And so have their parents, who have had to stay in the children’s area to supervise their kids.

Parents have been unable to talk to other adults who are in other parts of the church and so a wedge has been driven between people in church who have kids and those who don't.

Now, we might ask, why is this a problem?

And to answer this question we must remind ourselves why we share tea and coffee at the end of the service anyway?

And the reason can't be, can it, the quality of the coffee, wonderful as that is, or indeed to save us from having to make a coffee when we get home from church; making our own coffee is not such a hard task.

Rather, we share tea and coffee to give people chance to catch up with each other; to build relationships within the life of the church; and to offer hospitality to newcomers and have chance to get to know them.

And I would suggest, in some small way, our sharing tea and coffee together is a sign of God's kingdom: as we make room for one another and share fellowship together.

Our tea and coffee time is not an unimportant tag on, but rather an integral part of what we do as a church.

For this reason, I'd encourage you, if at all possible, to stay at the end of a service.

And I would urge you to make the most of the opportunity tea and coffee brings to talk to others, to show concern for others, and to encourage one another.

This time to talk is a time when we can ask others, "how was your week?"

And we can be more honest and open than just saying, "fine, how was yours?"

We can share the issue at work, the problem with our neighbours, the joy of exam results.

It's a time when we offer to pray for each other; it's easy to do.

It's a time for saying, "what did you make of the sermon, then" and talking about something of real value, as well as just the rubbish weather!

And it's a time when no one should feel left out or alone.

I know it's only natural to make a bee-line for people we know and like; but as an act of worship to God and service of others, we can make time to talk to people we find difficult, and to get to know the newcomer.

Now if this is going to be the case, then it's no good if we are all split up into separate bits; our relationships will be poorer and it will give a distorted view of God's kingdom.

Our older folk need the other adults to take an interest in them and check they are ok.

Our kids need adults to take an interest in them, and provide good role models.

Our adults need to let off steam to older folk who have experienced the same difficulties as they face and have come through them.

We all need each other.

So we need to get back to everyone sharing tea and coffee together.

But we need to do it in a way that is safe and enhances our time together.

I've spoken to the churchwardens, and the CYP leaders and Farningham PCC, and we would like to suggest a few simple guidelines:

- That anyone can go anywhere in church, except for the pulpit, the sanctuary and the vestry. These are out of bounds for kids and adults, unless you have a job to do in them.
- That no one ever runs
- That playing boisterous games is just too dangerous and can't be permitted inside.

With these simple guidelines, we should all be able to get along safely, without kids having hot drinks dropped on them, or adults being knocked over.

But we will all need to work together at making these guidelines work.

We are so fortunate to have so many kids and families in church.

Tea and coffee would not be an issue if we were a church with only adults in it – but God has blessed us with many wonderful children and we have a responsibility to help nurture these children in the Christian faith.

We cannot just leave it to the parents.

Let me give you an example from our own family. I have to dash off to Lullingstone, leaving Helen with four children.

Someone wants to talk to Helen and is in the middle of a sentence.

Helen, with only two hands and four children watches as one child disappears one way and another in the opposite direction. All four kids have quite unnaturally been sat still for the last hour and need to let off steam.

They end up somewhere they shouldn't and despite what we have told them, they are kids, and they start doing something they shouldn't.

The person Helen is talking to is blissfully unaware of this. But Helen is starting to panic!

Help!

My view is that, according to the African proverb, it takes a village to raise a child.

If all the adults in church could keep an eye out for the kids, that would be great; and Helen and others will be able to have adult conversations without being distracted all the time.

But not to keep an eye on the kids ready to wag a finger and tell them off; if we do, we run the risk of driving out kids from church and Jesus gave a very severe warning about that involving having mill stones tied round necks and being thrown into the sea.

But if we see kids doing something mad or being in the wrong place, we can say with a smile and a twinkle in our eye, "are you really sure that you should be doing that? I wonder if your mum would let you have another biscuit?"

And positively, us adults can take few moments to just chat to the kids; ask what they did in Sunday school, how their football team is doing; tell them their dress is really pretty.

These small acts of kindness will mean so much.

And they will open up the possibility of meaningful relationships where our young people can really value and really benefit from the wisdom and love of older Christians.

I know that the time is coming, and with John is probably not far off, that stuff will happen in his life. I hope the first person he will turn to will be me. But it may not be. He may need to talk to someone else.

And I want the person he turns to, as well as obviously family and godparents, to be some of you.

People who will love him, give him sound advice, and help him negotiate the difficulties of adolescent life Christianly.

I'm sure many other parents in church feel the same.

So, I wonder if we might do the following?

Those of us who are parents will try to explain to our kids that they need to show respect for this building, and even more importantly, respect for church members; they need to behave in a way that shows care for older people who might get hurt by them running into them

We'll explain that we are concerned for their safety too.

The Sunday school team will help reinforce this with the kids.

But perhaps those of us who are adults without children might spare a thought for frazzled parents, trying desperately to get their kids through church, worried about what other people think, hoping for five minutes of adult conversation.

And perhaps we could all make an effort to be inclusive of each other, whether we are three or ninety three.

And perhaps we could all try to welcome, support, and encourage each other; helping each other to be better followers of Jesus Christ.

I read recently in a Zimbabwean paper:

The "Power of Gradual" works because, quite simply, little things add up to a big thing if you have enough little things.

Given enough time, the steady drip of water becomes an ocean.

Given enough time, small regular deposits in the bank become a small fortune.

We have the power, as a church, small step by small step, to bring children up as followers of Jesus, help adults cope with the pressures of busy lives, help older people feel valued and cared for, and to share the wisdom of their years.

Let's not despise small things; let's not despise anyone.

But by doing the small things well, let's continue in our mission to build great churches, that reflect something of the nature of our servant king, Jesus.