

# CROESO

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*A four-session course reflecting on welcome*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:1,2*



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## Introduction

The word 'croeso' is one of the best known Welsh words. It means 'welcome!' and immediately emphasises, I think, something warm, something meaningful. It offers a feeling that we are valued, that we are important and that our presence is special.

Of course, when we greet people in our churches or at church events, we want them to feel welcome. It's part of offering hospitality, it's a polite thing to do! But of course, it's so much more than that, because when we welcome people into our churches, we are extending the welcome that God offers to us, to be part of his family. We are reminding them of God's promise to love us, always.

A well-known bible quote says:

***Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.  
Hebrews 13: 1,2***

This refers to a time when, in the Old Testament (Genesis 18:1-16), Abraham showed hospitality to some strangers who turned out to be angels. The writer to the Hebrews may be saying the same might happen to us, but they probably aren't and it probably won't!

However, it is saying that when we offer a real welcome, when we show real hospitality then we may very well end up being blessed in ways that we can't even imagine. But of course, that isn't a primary reason for welcoming people – the primary reason for welcoming people is simply because we're told to love one another. It's an extravagant, perhaps some would even say eccentric, thing to do, but it can be life changing for us, and for others.

When we welcome people into our churches we can do it to fill up the seats, we can do it offering some wonderful entertainment in music and perhaps even a great speaker, we can do it to make sure we've got enough people coming through the door to keep that door open in the future or for lots of other reasons that I can't immediately think of! But actually none of those things are what we do it for:

- We welcome people because they are people like us (whatever they look like, whatever their background, whatever their views), who are welcomed by God into his family
- We welcome because we want to show something of the love and care that God shows to us and to them
- We welcome because we want to invite people into a deeper relationship with God who changes lives for the better

Offering a good welcome in our churches is essential and that doesn't just happen. We can have some of the friendliest people in the world, and they will certainly make a difference, but offering a really good welcome involves preparation and planning. It involves prayer and



expectation – expectation that through the welcome we seek to offer, people will see and know something more of God.

Some churches offer a great welcome, others perhaps not as good, but however well we do it, we can always strive to do it better. We all know what being made welcome can feel like and we probably know the opposite. In these sessions we'll think about some of the theory of welcome. We'll think about what the bible says about welcome and why we do it and who we're welcoming, but it's important not to leave it to theory – welcome is something we do, something active, something positive.

We want our churches to be places that people are drawn to. Places where they can experience something powerful and wonderful. How we welcome them will be an important factor in how successful those things will be, and whether they come back at all!

The following quote from Desmond Tutu is both powerful and challenging!

*We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.*

These sessions won't provide all of the answers as to how to offer a good welcome. That takes planning, reflection, prayer and a desire to do it, but it will hopefully encourage you to think more about welcome. Many churches say, 'all are welcome'. These sessions invite us to think how true that is and how important it can be.

**Ian Rees**

## How to use this course

The aim of this is to be flexible. Each session has an opening and closing prayer, but you may wish to do your own prayers and even extend this into a time of worship.

The reading is printed in full. It would be good for participants to read this through along with the thought prior to the session, but it is good if the reading can be repeated, read aloud within the group. There are discussion questions and some opportunities to think about practical actions. The practical actions are for individuals to consider although some groups may want to discuss them.

As with all small groups, there should be a confidence that things discussed of a personal nature remain confidential. It is also good to make the setting as comfortable and informal as possible. Refreshments are always good!

The aim of the course is to think about welcome in the context of some bible readings, but also to think about where our thoughts might lead in terms of thinking more about the welcome that we, or our church, gives.



# Session 1

## Why welcome is important

### Opening prayer:

*Father, make the doors of our hearts, our homes, and communities wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, prejudice, and pride. Let us hasten to welcome the stranger, and so welcome your Son. We make this prayer in his name, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

### Reading: John 13: 34,35

***<sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.***

### Thought:

In some ways, this session will hopefully be pretty clear. The reading chosen is one from any number where Jesus makes it obvious that we are to extend the hand of welcome widely. Nobody, absolutely nobody, is outside of God's love. And that can bring tensions because we tend to impose our own judgements and attitudes on people and situations. But in some of the most challenging ideas of our discipleship we are asked to look at people with God's eyes and that is to look at them as people who are loved by Him, people who are special, people for whom, whatever they might have done or be doing, there is a hope of something better.

This short reading does two things. It both exhorts us to love one another, and it also reminds us that it is in how we treat other people that our discipleship will be revealed. I like, and have often used, the illustration of there being 5 gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and us – and most people won't read the first 4! As Christians we know the incredible blessings God gives to us, but there is also a sense of responsibility. We are to preach and be good news.

When we think of welcome in our churches, we often think of what happens at the door when people arrive or what happens at the refreshments after the service, but welcome is so much bigger. The words of Jesus don't say, 'love one another before and after the service on a Sunday' or 'love those who we find it easy to get on with' or even 'spend time with those who we agree with'. Jesus said, 'love one another'.

Sometimes that has been interpreted comfortably by people to suggest Jesus was just talking to his disciples so he was telling them to love one another, or perhaps at its widest, to love other Christians, but in case there is any doubt, remember these words of Jesus:



*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”*  
 Matthew 5:43-46

The desire to live out the commandment of Jesus to love people must be our primary motivation for offering welcome, but it isn’t the only reason. Others include:

- People who have a good experience are more likely to come back
- Developing good relationships will allow people to feel more comfortable in engaging in more discussion and more willing to ask any questions they have
- Word of mouth is very powerful – those who receive a good and warm welcome will be more likely to tell their friends

### Discussion Questions:

How important is ‘welcome’ in our church?

What arrangements are in place to welcome people at services and other events, or just to a church that is regularly open?

Jesus commands us to love one another – how much of our desire to welcome is a response to that command, and how much is a response to the fact that God loves and welcomes us?

Think of a time when you have felt really welcome – it might be at church, at an event, a party, visiting someone etc. What were your feelings? And what was your response?

### Reflection:

Can you think of 2 things that could be done to make your church more welcoming? How can you help to make those things happen?

### Response:

Choose one thing from your reflection and put it into practice, or speak to a member of the team at the church who might be able to help it to happen.

### Closing Prayer:

*Father, we thank you that you do not change, that you remain the same from before the beginning of time into eternity. Your word says that you are good to all; you have compassion on all you have made. Give us, your people, a great love for your body, the church. May we love, serve and worship together, being filled with faithfulness and joy. May we grow in grace, love and welcome. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*



## Session 2

# Who do we welcome – how far is our reach?

### Opening Prayer:

*Father, make the doors of our hearts, our homes, and communities wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, prejudice, and pride. Let us hasten to welcome the stranger, and so welcome your Son. We make this prayer in his name, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

### Reading: Luke 14: 15-24

*Then Jesus said to him, ‘Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for everything is ready now.” But they all began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies.” Another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies.” Another said, “I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.” So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”’*

### Thought:

There is a clear instruction to welcome everyone into our churches as we recognise that the message of the gospel is for all people. The reality is though that, as we look around many churches, there are lots of people who look a little bit like us. The desire to welcome others may be there in our minds, but it hasn't transferred over into something that's happening.

This story that Jesus is telling is really interesting for the church today. We are enormously blessed by having volunteers who work so hard to maintain our churches and the life of our churches, but that is hard work and sometimes the results of all the effort seem negligible (as an aside, they're not!). However, this story is about a banquet of celebration and sometimes we're not in the mood for celebrating in our churches, because we're tired or because we've perhaps lost a little bit of confidence. And so we can be slow to join in the celebration! Or perhaps we take for granted the celebration element of our faith and the fact that the gospel (meaning good news) is indeed good news for everyone – and because of that we forget to tell them.



This reading is a reminder of our need to celebrate, to recognise and respond to good news and to live our lives changed by that good news. It is also a reminder though to look at those people who are missing from our congregations and think of ways in which we can be inviting to them, but then also how we will welcome them. It isn't offering a true welcome to invite people to something and then expect them to completely fit in to exactly what we want and like.

Welcoming can be disruptive, but it is so important. And when we think of invitation and welcome, we can often be surprised by how many contacts we have. Our immediate reach includes friends and family of congregation members, people who attend events and services in our churches or halls, those we meet at community events or in projects such as foodbanks, schools, uniformed organisations, community groups etc. Think about your reach in your area and what opportunities there might be to 'reach out'.

### Discussion Questions:

We've thought about the importance of welcome. Think about what could be disruptive in offering a welcome to people and how willing we are to accept that disruption.

Who are the people who are missing from our churches? Why do we think they are missing?

When people 'outside' look at our churches, do they think that they might be missing out on a great celebratory banquet?

### Reflection:

Think of how we can emphasise celebration in our churches.

Thinking about the people who are missing from our churches, consider two things (services/events/activities) that can offer an opportunity of invitation and welcome.

### Response:

To help us remember to celebrate keep a "positivity" list this week and write down everything you want to give thanks for at the end of each day.

### Closing Prayer:

*Father, we thank you that you do not change, that you remain the same from before the beginning of time into eternity. Your word says that you are good to all; you have compassion on all you have made. Give us, your people, a great love for your body, the church. May we love, serve and worship together, being filled with faithfulness and joy. May we grow in grace, love and welcome. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*





# Session 3

## What does being 'welcoming' really mean?

### (Creating a culture of welcome)

#### Opening Prayer:

*Father, make the doors of our hearts, our homes, and communities wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, prejudice, and pride. Let us hasten to welcome the stranger, and so welcome your Son. We make this prayer in his name, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

#### Reading: Matthew 19: 13-15

***Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.***

#### Thought:

This reading continues to develop the theme of the last session where we considered the range of people with whom we have contact and the opportunities to offer invitation and welcome. It addresses perhaps some of the most fundamental issues of welcome, again building on the reading from the last session. Here Jesus emphasises the importance of people who others didn't recognise as being particularly important. In the culture in which Jesus exercised his physical earthly ministry children were useful for the future, for what they would bring in years to come, but as they were, they were not offered a voice.

This reading is fundamental to our understanding of welcome because it's not just about children, but about everyone. It is about the lifelong worshipper feeling welcome just as it's about the unlikely person coming in off the street. In the last session we thought of the different people and groups we can meet, and getting the welcome right is as important as offering the invitation. To do welcome well, we need to develop a culture of welcome for all that just becomes part of us. That is something that takes organisation and planning as a church, but also the willingness of everyone to be involved. We don't want a group of people with permanent fixed and rather false smiles on their faces, but we do need to constantly remember how easy it is for someone who is visiting or new to the church, or attending a church event, to feel unwanted or unwelcome.

When Jesus welcomed the children, he wasn't doing so at the expense of anyone else. He was making the point that there must be room for everybody. In developing a culture of welcome we need to think about:



- Who is doing the initial welcome – are they smiling, informative, not pushy?
- How welcoming is the building – is it comfortable, does it feel welcoming? Can you sit anywhere?!
- The culture of welcome needs to be widespread amongst the congregation - everyone is playing a part, and everyone needs to be aware of that in their behaviour
- Language is important – e.g. ‘we’re glad you’re here’
- The service needs to be accessible and clear
- Refreshments need to be good and varied (catering for all). They should also be free – you may have a place for donations, but don’t make it all about donations! Don’t ignore people at refreshments time, but recognise if they do want to be quiet or alone

### Discussion Questions:

When you enter a church, what things make you feel welcome? Would these be the same if you were a visitor or not used to attending – what might be different?

What features of your church (people and the building) are particularly welcoming?

How involved are the whole congregation in offering a welcome? Does everyone recognise there is a role for all in offering welcome? How best can that be emphasised?

### Reflection:

Consider two ways in which the welcome in your church could be improved. Share those thoughts with someone who has the influence to bring about change if you don’t.

How comfortable are you at welcoming people – is there more you could do?

### Response:

Create a name badge for special events in church to help people feel more comfortable in approaching you.

### Closing Prayer:

*Father, we thank you that you do not change, that you remain the same from before the beginning of time into eternity. Your word says that you are good to all; you have compassion on all you have made. Give us, your people, a great love for your body, the church. May we love, serve and worship together, being filled with faithfulness and joy. May we grow in grace, love and welcome. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*



# Session 4

## How welcome changes lives

### Opening Prayer:

*Father, make the doors of our hearts, our homes, and communities wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, prejudice, and pride. Let us hasten to welcome the stranger, and so welcome your Son. We make this prayer in his name, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

### Reading: Luke 19: 1-10

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

### Thought:

Through each session it's hopefully been obvious in our thoughts that welcome is something that is very often two-way. In offering welcome to people, we can very often be blessed by them, sometimes in ways we would never have expected. The account of Zacchaeus is a great example of a welcome that is 'two-way'. In the reading, Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' request to come to his house by hurrying down from the tree he had climbed. The reading says he was 'happy to welcome him'. And I'm sure Zacchaeus would have got out the best crockery, served good food and drink and made Jesus feel very welcome!

But of course, there was a much bigger welcome being offered here and that was the welcome that Jesus was offering to this rich tax collector to be part of his family. And it was this welcome that changed the life of Zacchaeus immediately. When we extend welcome to others, as Zacchaeus did, we may well be recipients of something tremendous from those we welcome. In the introduction to this course, we thought about the words from the Letter to the Hebrews about welcoming strangers, because in doing so, some have entertained angels.



Abraham's life was changed because he offered a welcome. Zacchaeus' life was changed by the welcome he gave. In offering a welcome, we have the possibility of our lives being changed by the person we welcome, but we also offer something about Jesus and the love and welcome that he offers. Sometimes, welcoming people seems to be something routine, but it never is. When Zacchaeus climbed the tree, he had hopes and expectations of meeting Jesus in some way. He was privileged that Jesus said he would come to his house, and he welcomed him.

When we invite and welcome people, we too can be excited and expectant. We, like Zacchaeus, have the privilege of hosting Jesus and sharing his good news. There are many stories of lives changed by Jesus – perhaps yours?

I recently saw a church and was looking at this theme of welcome – and there was a poster on the wall which said, 'whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved'. But the church was locked and the poster on the wall was way back from the padlocked gate. This isn't a criticism of that church – there are all kinds of reasons why it may be locked, but it did make an interesting point about how clearly the welcome we offer is related to offering a relationship with Jesus.

I've often shared the story of Nicky Cruz who was a gang leader in New York (his story is told in 'The Cross and the Switchblade' by David Wilkerson and 'Run, Baby, Run' by Nicky Cruz himself). When arriving in New York first he was somewhat lost and tells of the time when he approached a church,

*'Moving on down the street I stopped in front of a Church. A heavy iron gate had been pulled across the front doors and it was fastened with a chain and padlock. I stood in front of the grey building, looking up at the steeple which pointed towards the heavens. The cold stone walls and dark stained glass windows huddled for protection behind the iron fence. The statue of a man with a kind face and sad eyes peered through the locked gate. His arms were outstretched and covered with snow. But he was locked in, and I was locked out...'*

The life of Nicky Cruz was changed though by God working through the persistence and faith of a preacher called David Wilkerson. He offered Nicky Cruz a welcome into a relationship with Jesus which eventually changed his life for ever, and led to him becoming a preacher himself.

The invitation and welcome offered by David Wilkerson wasn't easy. One part of the story recalls this exchange,

*"Nicky Cruz: You come near me and I'll kill you!  
David Wilkerson: Yeah, you could do that. You could cut me up into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street, and every piece will still love you."*

The welcome we are called to offer may never be anything like that, but it can be life changing for us and for others. It was for Nicky Cruz. It was for Zacchaeus and for so many more millions of people!



### Discussion Questions:

Can you think of an example, for yourself or others, where a welcome has been life changing?

Do we expect the way we welcome people to change lives?

Some recap thoughts: How important is welcome? How well do we do it in our churches? Can we create a culture of welcome if there isn't one now?

### Reflection:

In thinking about welcome, we need to be reflecting on what we are offering a welcome into. It may seem obvious that it is the church. But actually, the welcome we offer is so much bigger. We welcome on behalf of Jesus and invite people to consider developing a closer relationship with him. That is the importance of welcome – something life changing for us, and for others.

### Response:

Reflect on how Jesus has welcomed you, and then write down the feelings and emotions that come to mind.

### Closing Prayer:

*Father, we thank you that you do not change, that you remain the same from before the beginning of time into eternity. Your word says that you are good to all; you have compassion on all you have made. Give us, your people, a great love for your body, the church. May we love, serve and worship together, being filled with faithfulness and joy. May we grow in grace, love and welcome. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

