

## **1. Paul spent time with people.**

Three months trying to persuade Jewish people about Jesus before going to the gentiles. Then he spent two years trying to persuade them!

Why are we having a Season of Invitation? Generally in the church there is an expectation that people will decide to come to church themselves. It's as if we think, "We're here so people should come." We also have difficulty in understanding that there are barriers which stop people coming, because for us it is an easy thing to do.

We probably know people that go past church buildings every day of their lives, and are curious about what happens inside, or for whom the building brings back childhood memories of church, but they don't dare come in.

It takes a very brave person to walk into a church on their own, yet we can be sure that God is speaking to them, and perhaps all they need is a gentle invitation from someone they know.

I have often wondered exactly when it became difficult for people outside church to cross the threshold of their local church building. Once the church was the centre of the community. Nowadays we hear people say that they would feel hypocritical if they came. This self-disqualification is reinforced by their non-churchgoing friends. This feeling of being hypocritical can be overcome through simple invitation.

A "Season of Invitation" is really a very odd mission! It's a mission to those in the church already, not those who are outside it. We aim to reach the people who aren't in church through those who already are. But the beauty of it is that it is so simple. You don't have to go on a training course, or agree to wear a special uniform. The thought of unleashing the potential God has placed in each one of us through this simplest of activities is incredible.

In Luke 10:1–16, when Jesus sent seventy-two disciples out on a mission, He trusted each one of them to be all that God had intended them to be. When they returned, they shared their surprise and amazement at what they'd experienced. These ordinary men saw and felt the power of the kingdom of God. But the more wonderful thing about this story is the fact that Jesus sent them. He wanted them to share in this simple form of mission. He showed us that mission is not God doing things on His own. He has of course prepared the way, but we also have a part to play. So in the same way that Jesus asked the seventy-two to go ahead of Him, today God is asking us to play our part in His work in our generation. And our part, often, is just to invite.

The success of a Season of Invitation lies in one person inviting one person. And remarkably, it does not rely on one person inviting one person and that person saying "yes". The answer to the invitation is in God's hands. We should not take responsibility for the answer – and yet so often we do, or we try to. We worry about whether they will accept or not, and read into their answer all sorts of criticisms of ourselves. But the reality is, some people will say yes and some people will say no... and we have to get over any disappointment we might feel.

There was a man in the video who had been invited and said, “Because it’s you, I’ll come.” Some people will come, even although they are not really interested, because they have been asked by a friend; some will secretly be excited about coming; some will tell you to get lost – perhaps less politely than that. Paul spent time with people and so should we, invitation from relationship is more powerful than from a stranger.

Notice what it says (v10) – until every Jew and Gentile in the province had heard the message. They didn’t all hear it directly from Paul – they heard it through other people sharing it with them.

## **2. Paul received power from God.**

Remember when you first brought your girlfriend or your boyfriend back to meet your parents? Do you remember worrying, “Will my parents like him/her? Will they get on? Or will they embarrass me in front of my girlfriend/boyfriend?” When you introduce your friend to church, you go through the same sort of worry. You fear that if it doesn’t go well, your friend may not like you anymore. This kind of introduction takes the friendship to a different level and we are anxious. What will our friend say when they meet our church friends? What will they think about the service? Will it be too long? Will something go wrong? Will someone get up and say something that just makes you cringe?

### **10 Excuses people give for not inviting people:**

- **‘I suffer it and I don’t want my friend to have to’ or ‘My friend won’t want to go’.** We all remember excruciatingly bad services – some of us have led them! – and we always remember those services when we think about asking someone to come.
- **‘I don’t want to be rejected’.** Saying no to church is not the same as saying no to your friendship. People often have to be asked more than once!
- **‘We have no non-church friends’.** If it’s true don’t worry – if you pray God will guide you to the people to ask!
- **‘It’s the minister’s job’.** Jesus did what he came to do, but he also sent his followers out to do their bit.
- **‘My friend said no last year’.** That was last year – ask again. Remember, success is in the invitation.
- **‘I was never invited – I was born into the church’.** We have all been invited by someone
- **‘What if it damages my friendship?’** It is very unlikely that you’ll spoil a real friendship at one service.
- **‘Our services and people are unpredictable/ strange/ long/ boring’.** So why on earth do you go?
- **‘The congregation will think my friend is not ‘our’ type of person’.** Jesus had that between the Pharisees and the ‘sinners’. He did it anyway.
- **‘Faith is a private thing’, or, ‘I wouldn’t know what to say’, or, ‘They might ask me what I believe’.** These are just different ways of saying, ‘I’m scared’.

We’re told in the passage that Paul was given the power to perform great miracles. Paul believed in Jesus – just like you and I do. Do we think that God loved Paul more than us?

Was Paul more godly than us? Did Paul never wonder what he would say? The difference is that Paul trusted God and the more he did that, the more he saw God at work. Paul was jailed, beaten, stoned and shipwrecked because of his faith, but he still trusted God. All we're being asked to do is invite someone to church.

Our anxiety about it seems like a 'first world problem' compared to what so many of our brothers and sisters are going through. FWP: "Don't know how I'll cope, my ipod is broken"; Ian Poulter - *Booked 6 business seats for my wife & nanny to fly home & @British\_Airways downgrade my nanny so Katie has no help for 10 hours with 4 kids.*

Worrying how someone will respond to an invitation is the Western Church equivalent of a first world problem.

### **3. Lives were transformed.**

When the sons of Sceva tried to cast out the evil spirit they were effectively doing it in their own power. They used the name of Jesus but they didn't actually know Jesus. That's the foundation of our faith – knowing Jesus. When we repent and ask Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour we enter into a living relationship with him. That relationship is expected to bring transformation to our lives – we are expected to show that. Sometimes we feel guilty about how little transformation we see in ourselves and that makes us anxious that the person we might ask will think we're a hypocrite! The thought of inviting someone might give us cause to think about the state of our own relationship with God, BUT, it cannot be an excuse for not inviting someone! The response is between them and God and is not our responsibility – our responsibility is simply to invite.

You'll note that it was the believers who brought out their books on witchcraft and fifty thousand silver coins was a vast sum in those days. They experienced transformation as well. Sometimes it is us who benefit most by taking steps of faith.

There is one other issue about the whole 'Season of Invitation' that we need to address: if you are a member of this congregation are you here today as a guest, or a host? If you are a guest in someone's home you expect the host to attend to your needs and to make you feel comfortable; if you are the host you take the responsibility to make people welcome, to help them feel comfortable in a different environment, to make visiting as easy as possible. So, are you here as a guest, or a host? If we are going to invite people to join us we need as many hosts as possible. You might need to go and collect your friend, or walk with them, so that they don't have to come through the doors on their own; you might need to go through the sheet to explain what happens during the service; if you see someone you don't recognise, don't expect someone else to welcome them, you make the effort – much better to be welcomed by half a dozen people than by none.

We want to see lives being transformed and one part of that is introducing people to Jesus. Another is introducing them to a community that is open and welcoming – we need to be that community.

Back to Church Sunday (7 Sep);

Harvest (28 Sep);  
Remembrance (9 Nov);  
Advent (30 Nov) and  
Nativity (21 Dec)

None of this is difficult but it will take courage – remember though God regularly told his people to be courageous and he followed it up with, “and I will be with you!” He will be with you too.