

I've been reading a book called 'Watching the English' by Kate Fox, who is very interested in how English people behave. If you're from another country you may have a quiet smile... She talks about the typical English reserve, and she contrasts it with the way we get on with our pets. She says, 'It is often said that we treat them like people, but this is not true. Have you seen how we treat people? It would be unthinkable to be so cold and unfriendly to an animal.' She says 'we tend to be far more open, easy, communicative and demonstrative in our relationships with our animals than with each other.'

I think she's got a point. In fact, we are suspicious of people who are over friendly - a bit too American, we might say. Mostly, we like to keep ourselves to ourselves. There are lots of subjects we wouldn't talk about. We might know our neighbours but we aren't 'in and out of each other's houses'. Perish the thought!

So I think we might have felt a little bit uncomfortable if we'd lived in the very early years of the church. 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread together at home and they ate together with glad and generous hearts - and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.'

These first believers didn't just meet up on Sundays, or a few times in between - they lived in each other's pockets - they shared their financial problems with each other and

helped each other - they ate in each other's homes, they shared each other's lives. And they didn't become a cosy group - they kept welcoming new believers into their midst.

I don't think that I would have found living like that very easy. I like people, and I like to meet new people - but I also like to retreat into a place where I can be on my own, or with my family.

And although we think of ourselves as a church family, and we have good relationships with each other - I think! - there is always that bit of distance. We don't talk about our financial problems - and there are lots of other things we don't usually talk to each other about. We meet up here, and in other places, but we're not that great at being hospitable - people who come to church for the first time don't often get asked back for Sunday lunch. We might ask how much we really share our lives with each other.

So how did they manage it in the first century church? Maybe Middle Eastern culture is more open, but perhaps there was also something else that came from their newfound faith - something we could learn from.

In our gospel reading Jesus uses the image of a sheepfold, and he says he is the gate for the sheep. A shepherd would literally become the gate of the sheepfold in his day - they would lie across the entrance to the sheepfold to keep our thieves or wild animals, and to defend the flock.

It's an image of defence which might appeal to the English character. But I think that it may also be the way we can learn to be more open. If we are already defended by Jesus from the deepest things we fear then we don't need to defend ourselves.

I wonder what those fears might be, in a social situation. The fear of being embarrassed? The fear of being shown up? But if Jesus is looking out for us, perhaps we can face down those fears. He knows each of us by name, we are precious to him, he cares for us and walks with us - and if we really allow that to penetrate our minds and our hearts then our lack of self-confidence can begin to be replaced by a loving acceptance of ourselves as we are.

Our Psalm also gives us some reassurance. As our shepherd, the Lord accompanies us through deep and dangerous places. That may mean external circumstances - or it may mean in the landscape of our own inner emotions. One of the things the English find difficult is owning and expressing how we feel - especially if we are men. Kate Fox suggests that for English men only three emotions are usually allowable - surprise, anger and triumph, usually expressed loudly, with plenty of swearing. Sadness, for instance, is less easy to admit. I've often passed on what my training Vicar said to me - churches are meant to be places where it's Ok to cry. But we don't find it easy.

But in these scary inner landscapes of sadness or shame, or anger or fear, we are not walking alone - the Lord is walking alongside us, ready to help us live with our emotions. So we don't need to avoid situations where those feelings might be brought to the surface, or spill out. We can afford to move beyond the usual politeness and be real with each other. That will make us vulnerable, but that's OK.

Sometimes our nervousness about letting others too close is because we fear that our resources will be depleted. We 'need our own space'. We only have so much to give. But the psalm reminds us that it is not just up to us to find and protect our resources, whether it's money or energy or patience or love. The good shepherd is the one who leads us to green pastures and still waters - he revives our soul. He can show us ways to be open to each other which are sustainable. Jesus took himself off first thing in the morning, so he could be there for people when they came needed him. God has ways of renewing our resources.

Perhaps the thing we fear most is giving up control. I've lost count of the number of times someone has told me that they are very independent. But the picture of God as our shepherd is a reminder that we are not really independent - we are completely dependent on him and the more we allow ourselves to depend on him the more we are set free of our own need for control. And the more we can learn then to be interdependent - dependent on each other.

It's not easy learning to be undefended - to open up to each other and to open up to God. I read recently about a man called Bill, coming to the Taizé community in France, and experiencing the singing and the silence. He says 'After 45 minutes the chant was only beginning to penetrate the hard little shell we carry around with us.'

The hard little shell we carry around with us. I know that is true at times for me, and my prayer then is that God will tenderise me, and break open my hard defences

Last Saturday we went with Jon and Alex from our Pizza plus group to an event in Birmingham put on by the Taizé community. We were encouraged to mix with the other 100 or so young people and leaders in our part of the event, from all round the UK, and as far away as Finland. The leader made us walk round, and then stop, and talk to the person we were next to - which was a bit uncomfortable at first, but you got used to it. Then we went into groups with people we had never met before - and I met some great young people.

It reminded me of staying at Taizé years ago, and being put in a group who were almost all from Germany - and I don't speak German. We served lunch together each day, we did bible study with one person translating, we had coffee with lots of gestures. It wasn't easy but it was good.

While we were in Birmingham we also heard about a great project supporting asylum seekers, and some volunteers

spoke how much they got out of those new relationships and how enriching it was. I see the same thing with our own Asylum Seekers Support Group, sharing meals and trips out with those they are befriending, sharing needs and joys and sadnesses, sharing something of their lives together.

It seems to me that there is something in this sort of sharing together which is part of what Jesus meant when he said 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' And my prayer, for myself, and for all of us, is that as we put our trust in Jesus the good shepherd, defending us and providing for us and being alongside us, we may learn to lower our barriers a little, and be a little more open to each other, and share more of our real lives together - perhaps even beginning with our conversations over coffee.

To end I'm going to read a little poem which expresses that prayer.

Undefended, step
lightly into each new day
open to the heart's core.