

When we welcome the visitor and the stranger . . .
By the Very Rev. Kevin C. Carroll

A few years ago my wife Jane and I spent two weeks in Australia seeing sights and visiting friends. One Sunday morning we were worshipping in St. John's Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane. While the priest was delivering the sermon, a curious event occurred: a tourist with a camera wandered through the cathedral, oblivious to what was going on, taking pictures. It was a little distracting to say the least. What was also intriguing was the response of the cathedral staff.

As the would-be tourist stood directly in the crossing, in front of the congregation, snapping away, the priest delivering the sermon did not miss a beat. She kept on preaching like the person was not there. One of the ushers, who had obviously dealt with this before, very graciously walked up the person, shook their hand, and gently guided the person to the side and explained what was going on. The traveler was offered a seat and joined the congregation for the duration of the service.

I experienced something similar last week during a week-day Eucharist here at All Saints'. A few people had come in to see the Icon Exhibit. We were in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, so we were squirreled away on the side. I was aware of these people because they were talking to each other so as to be heard. One of the docents explained that there was a service going on. The people continued to visit the exhibit, but were quiet. And a few times during the service I was aware that they were sneaking a peak at what we were doing. It was wonderful. These people enjoyed the beauty of the art here, and were able to see what we do so well. Worship. In that moment I was once again so proud to be at All Saints'.

How we welcome the stranger is critical. When someone stumbles through the doors of a church, especially on a Sunday morning, it can be an intimidating experience. On Sunday morning our worship is beautiful. It is easy for someone who has not been in church for a long time - maybe never - to feel slightly overwhelmed.

When someone is guided by the Holy Spirit to come through our doors, for whatever reason, they are seeking a relationship with God. They may not know that, but they are. And before they encounter God, they encounter us!

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'."

We are all made in the image and likeness of God. How people perceive that image and likeness is up to us. When we welcome the visitor or the stranger, it is as if we were welcoming Christ himself. We have many visitors here at All Saints'. We are called to welcome them and invite them in. The Icon exhibition gives us the perfect opportunity to do just that. Invite, welcome, include.