**Ministerial Meandering**

During my mental wanderings over the last few days, and particularly with having had a Celebration of Life in our church last Saturday, I have been thinking of why people are reluctant to come to church.

This has been precipitated, perhaps, by the Groundwork Workshop that Ginny, Lynn, Graham, and I have been participating in over the last several weeks. This workshop, put on by the diocese, is exploring ‘Growing Small Churches’ - which doesn’t mean adding extensions to the building, but increasing the size of our congregation.

One of the sessions tasked us to think of how we might actually invite people to our church; what words might we use, what blocks and excuses might we expect, and so on. The facilitators encouraged us to use role play - but none of the four of us was too keen on that, so we just discussed it instead.

Of several objections that people might raise about coming to church, we thought that folk often have a preconceived idea of what they are going to see and experience. I certainly have a sense of trepidation when entering an evangelical church because I had an uncomfortable encounter in such a church in the past.

I had gone into the church a few minutes before the service was due to begin, and was kneeling down to focus my mind and have a little one-on-one time with the Boss. Not 15 seconds after I had knelt, I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up into the earnest face of one of the welcomers (I assumed) who had ‘missed’ me on the way in.

“Have you been saved, brother?” he asked me; I paused, slowly got up from my prayers, smiled at him and said, “Not from you - unfortunately”, and left.

However well-meaning the man was, that was NOT the way to welcome someone into their church - especially when I was obviously taking a moment of private prayer. It is hardly surprising then, that some folk are wary of having such experiences themselves, and not knowing how to respond, particularly if they are still searching for answers - as we all are.

Another reason that folks are reluctant to attend church (I think) is that they are afraid of showing their emotions.

At the Celebration of Life service that we held on Saturday, there were rows of stony faces with expressionless masks; how sad, I thought. The widower himself was a little dewy-eyed at one point, but didn’t let it overtake him.

Having lived in Africa, and spent more time than I would wish in the Middle East, I am used to raw emotion being expressed in public, and I believe it to be cathartic for the most part. Expressions of joy - in weddings and baptisms, and grief - in funerals and memorial services, are normal and to be encouraged. We need to break out of our staid and inhibited - rather British - reserve, and if we feel like dancing and clapping to a song, we should feel free to do so.

I am not saying by this that I expect us to all do what the leader does - it’s not a sort of ‘Simon says’ game - but if the need to weep or laugh or dance comes upon us, we should feel free to give it expression. Remember how David danced before the Lord; and even if his wife, Michal, disapproved, I am sure that the Boss didn’t.

God gave us feelings and emotions to express, and to show our gifts of love, joy, or sadness before the Author and Creator of those gifts, is only to honour Him. So I make no apology for any tears, whoops, or dances that you may see from your slightly crazy vicar.

Bear in mind that this ‘permission’ includes anger too; your fear and anger are also part of you expressing who you are. I would only ask that you hold short of actually resorting to physical violence until you have got me in my vestry where I have an opportunity of defending myself - and I warn you now, I fight dirty.

Philip+