

THE BOOK OF HEAVEN

Any church that lives up to its mandate to love is already quietly but measurably changing the world around it, writes Roger Bretherton

Why do I keep doing this to myself? I ask that question a lot. Particularly when I find myself in church on a Sunday morning. When it comes to going to church, I'm not a pastor, a minister or a church leader, I'm more of a punter. I give the odd sermon every now and then, and once a month I play drums badly in the worship band. It's a well-kept secret that some of the best drummers in the world can be found playing in church on a Sunday morning. I am not one of those. No. I belong to the more common-or-garden variety of D-list drummers who can only play one beat at one volume, but at different speeds. Those who know that no silence is too pregnant, no moment so poignant, that it cannot be improved by the disconsolate clang of a cowbell.

The apostle Paul once wrote that if he spoke in the tongues of men or angels but had no love, he would be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. On a monthly basis I am that clanging cymbal.

But most Sundays I am content to sit in the pew and sing hymns - or at least I would be if our place had pews and sung hymns.

So why do I go? Let me answer that question by telling you about the 'Book of Heaven'. A few years back I noticed that one of the friendliest people I knew in church was doing an exceptionally good job of knowing people's names. It didn't matter how long ago they last showed their face on a Sunday morning, she would sidle up to them and greet them by name. And not just the easy British ones either - the Bobs, the Mildreds, the Ians - the names she grew up with. She remembered the tough ones. Even Kulani and Vishnu and Wan were guaranteed a warm welcome by name in their quarterly Sunday visit.

In the end I couldn't resist, I asked her how she did it. How did she remember so many people she had barely ever met? The answer was simple. Each Sunday after church she wrote them down in a little book she called the 'Book of Heaven'. She'd worked out that the main thing that stopped her speaking to people she didn't recognise on a Sunday morning was not that she didn't know them, but the worry that she should know them. She hated the thought of

introducing herself as if for first time to someone she had already met but had managed to forget.

So she started to keep a list. She worked out that every Sunday she could have three, maybe four, quality connections with people at church. Not just greetings and pleasantries, but something deeper - an update on their health, or a story about work, or a catchup on their kids. And each Sunday was a roll of the dice. Some weeks she chatted to people she did know, other weeks she spoke mainly to visitors. But every week, whoever she spoke to, she wrote their names down. And in the days that followed, whenever she had a quiet moment, she'd flick through the book and let her mind dwell fondly on the people she'd met on Sunday. She might even pray for them.

She had absolutely no idea of the impact this practice had on the people around her. It made her an illuminator, someone who brings other people to life. Psychologists would call this habit *loving-kindness meditation* or *strengths priming*, the intentional holding in mind of the good qualities of others even when they are not present.

It has a powerful effect. Studies of psychotherapists show those

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who hold the best qualities of their clients in mind for five minutes before each session report significantly better therapeutic outcomes. Research on loving-kindness practice goes even further. Twenty minutes spent each day cultivating loving feelings and intentions for ourselves and those around us, even the people we find difficult, produces significant physical and psychological benefits over time. Our stress, our psychological wellbeing, our immune and cardiovascular systems will be better off because of it.

And beyond that, being loving spreads. Not only do we benefit ourselves, but evidence suggests that the effect is contagious: the people we meet benefit, and the people they meet benefit, and perhaps even the people who meet those people benefit. Love ripples through social networks. The most important thing we do for the people of any community, workplace or church is not what we say to their faces but what we say and think about them behind their backs. Church, for me, even simple Sunday morning showing up at church, is the best place I've found to practise this principle.

I know this is not everyone's experience. For some people church becomes a coercive

nightmare or a safeguarding disaster. I've been there. I've walked through it myself and alongside others navigating toxic and abusive religious systems. But that's not my whole experience. It is not how church is when it is being what it is supposed to be.

Since we all emerged from lockdown, church has been by far the safest, warmest, most inspiring, hopeful and loving community to which I belong. But more than that. Not only is it a good place to be, a place where people know one another and are known, but it gives me hope. Because if love is contagious, rippling indiscriminately beyond the boundaries of the community, leaping physiologically from body to body, not caring who people are or what they believe, then any church that lives up to its mandate to love is already quietly but measurably changing the world around it.

So why the 'Book of Heaven'? I asked my friend. Why did she call her little notebook of names that?

She named it after something Jesus said. When his disciples thought they were making a big difference, they were getting high on the success of their

mission, Jesus redirects their attention. He tells them not to celebrate their own effectiveness but that their names are written in heaven. It was a good name for her little book, slowly accumulating names over weeks and months and years. For her, names are more important than numbers, because if she remembers a name, it reminds her that God does too.



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He is the author of *The GOD Lab - 8 spiritual experiments you can try at home* (2011, River Publishing & Media Ltd); and co-authored *Being Mindful, Being Christian: a guide to mindful discipleship* (Monarch, 2016).

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