

The Welcome of Christ...

... to build bridges, restore relationships.

A reflection given on the Third Sunday of Trinity, 28th June 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly in the Online Service

Matthew 10:40-end

"We have it in us to be Christ to each other, to work miracles of love and healing, as well as to have them worked upon us." - this quote by Frederick Buechner captures a key message in today's gospel reading.

The context for this passage in Matthew is that Jesus is preparing his disciples, instructing them before they go out into the towns and cities around them. In the preceding chapter of Matthew, Jesus has told them, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves." In today's passage, he's not telling them what to say to people; instead, he's telling them how to 'be': it's less about words than it is about attitudes.

As we've been able to begin opening up the churches again for private prayer, one of the best experiences we've had is being able to welcome people into the building. In many cases, this has been a 'welcoming-back' of those we recognise well and for whom the church is already considered their home. But it's also been exciting and encouraging to be able to welcome new people, people who we don't recognise, that could well be new to the act of coming into the building for prayer. Welcoming, as Jesus describes in this passage, is at the very heart of what it means to be one of Christ's followers, and I for one, feel somewhat restored after too many weeks of lock-down, to be able to be back in that role of welcoming others.

Christ came to restore relationships, to reconcile those who are far off, 'while we were still sinners,' to God. His act of self-sacrificial love on the cross was an act of bridge-building between us and God: we were no longer held by our own circumstances at an arm's-length distance from God. In today's passage, we are being encouraged to continue the bridge-building and are being given a special role. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," Jesus says. We are being given the role of mediators, ambassadors and welcomers, working on Christ's behalf, who in turn is mediating between ourselves and God. A welcome extended from us has the

potential to be a welcome extended from Jesus; a welcome received by us, is also a welcome received by the one who sent us and lives in us - Jesus - and in turn, the one who sent his son Jesus, our Father God.

Bridges: the bridge between God, the Father and the son, Jesus Christ; the bridge between Jesus and ourselves as his followers; and then the bridges between ourselves and others. Metaphorically, the church is never meant to have closed doors; 'Ekklesia', the church of the people of God, was never meant to have hard edges, to be just a lifeboat for the fortunate few. Instead, it was meant to have frayed edges, open edges, porous edges that mean there is always the potential to welcome more people, to draw in others; a lighthouse for all; or in the words of Jesus from Matthew, Chapter five verse fifteen: A light on a lamp stand that gave light to all in the house.

While we've been offering online worship, it's been interesting to reflect upon the fact that we have very little idea as to whom we are reaching: the numbers of viewers on Facebook and YouTube have been encouraging, even if they've only joined us for a short part of a midday prayer or one of our online Sunday services. However, we genuinely don't know who's watching. Rather than this being unsettling, I find that quite exciting: for a church that is meant to have frayed edges, it's exciting to think that there can be people we don't know being welcomed into our community for the very first time.

At the beginning of the week, the government announced that there is the possibility of public worship services resuming in July. Now, we still await the detailed guidance as to what that means in practice and are still having to work out the details for ourselves. However, one early suggestion in the media was that the numbers attending services may have to be capped. This has led to much mainly light-hearted speculation on social media about the potential of having to run telephone-booking lines, delicatessen counter-style ticketing, or a first come first serve arrangement. The idea of having to cap numbers whilst it being something that may be forced upon us, doesn't sit easily with the idea of welcome in today's passage or the idea of church with open and porous edges. So our challenge is how do we continue to welcome 'all', regardless of their circumstances? How do we continue to include 'all' whether they can easily come to the church building or not?

The welcome that Jesus offers is not without stretch and sacrifice, too. When he talks of rewarding those who "give even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones", there are two important things to note. Firstly, although we might easily think of the 'little ones' as children, it is perhaps better understood as 'one of the least of these', those who might be considered to some as inferior or vulnerable - so, who are those around us who might fall into this category and need to receive the welcome of Christ through our own outstretched arm? Secondly, to offer a cup of cold water suggests not only hospitality, but sacrifice: to offer cold water required drawing water from a deep well and often carrying it uphill in a heavy jar to the family home. We're not being called just to do the things that are easy in our welcome, but also possibly to make sacrifices and to be called to compromise our own comfort for the sake of extending that welcome.

As usual, Jesus's words cut to the core of who we are called to be, as part of his wonderfully restored, forgiven and loved family. The one who, out of his grace has built bridges for us, calls us to graciously build bridges and extend welcome to others. May we continually ask for his guidance and help each day as we, his church and his people, grow in our offering of the welcome of Christ to others? Let's ask for his help in extending our welcome and opening our doors in more ways than simply 'opening the doors' of our church buildings.

Reading Text

Matthew 10:24-39

⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”