

Welcome and Hospitality ...

... and the Lord himself will be your guest

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Trinity, 2nd July 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 10:40-end

Jesus said, *"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."* Well on Friday night we had a Ceilidh in the Minster and if you missed it - bad luck, because it was great fun. The old stones were humming with the sound of dancing and laughter and food and drink. And the Minster was full of familiar faces from the church family but also many others, people on the edge of church life or completely outside it and everybody came together in a wonderful evening of communal hospitality.

And today we're welcoming Charlie and Zoe as they join the Minster family and Charlie begins his ministry amongst us - after all the pomp and celebration of the ordination service at York Minster yesterday, now the real work begins. But I hope that you as a family will all feel welcome here and that the church family will prove to be open and hospitable.

And there's no great mystery about the theme being opened up in this morning's gospel because it is all about the importance of welcome. As Jesus says, *"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me."* It's one of the key features of Jesus's ministry, isn't it - this quality of welcome: he includes all kinds of odd and slightly unreliable characters amongst his disciples; he welcomes the prostitute who anoints his feet; he listens and gives time to blind Bartimaeus the Beggar and pays attention to him when others would just shut him down; Jesus welcomes the attention of a synagogue leader and a Roman centurion when they come to him with their different needs; he enjoys the hospitality of Mary and Martha and Lazarus repeatedly; he actually gets a reputation as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners because he enjoys their hospitality; he himself hosts the Last Supper and takes care over its preparation.

And when in this morning's gospel reading, Jesus talks about welcome and says, *"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me"* - the thing that strikes me is how one welcome leads to another. When someone receives us, we think it's all about us. But actually it's Jesus himself who is being welcomed. And not just Jesus, but God the Father himself. And so there's this great chain of welcome. Once it begins, who knows where it might end?

And that's why welcome is so important. Offering a welcome isn't just a nice, polite thing to do. Real welcome - welcome as an attitude of mind - is a sign of that openness which is a mark of faith. If you want to encounter Jesus, if you want to experience him in a way that is deep and lasting and life changing, then may I encourage you to practise hospitality: open your home to others; in church, make a point of speaking to the folk you don't recognise; take responsibility for making strangers feel at home - and I'm very conscious I'm preaching to myself here, because introverts don't always find it easy to reach out to others.

And offering a welcome may well involve an element of sacrifice: sacrifice of time; sacrifice of our sense of being in control of ourselves and of our lives; sacrifice in terms of everything you have to do to practise hospitality - peeling the spuds, cooking a meal, doing the clearing up afterwards. But in welcoming and making space for another person, whether it's just offering a cup of coffee or something more, we are welcoming and making space for Jesus himself.

And sometimes the Lord takes the initiative. If you remember the story of Zacchaeus, the original small businessman, the little tax collector who shins up a tree so that he can see over the heads of the crowd. There's a point in the story where Jesus looks up into the tree at Zacchaeus and says, *"Aren't you going to ask me home?"* So Jesus unlocks the welcome that was hidden inside Zacchaeus all along. Jesus doesn't wait for Zacchaeus to initiate it.

And you can read Holy Communion in the same way: Jesus is the host who invites us to draw near and gather round his table; to share fellowship with him. He makes space for you and me in the context of a meal; where we can get to know him better; and where relationships can be strengthened ;and where community can be built; and where we can feel we know and are known; and that we are secure in our sense of belonging and being welcome. Jesus as the host at Holy Communion mirrors the welcome of God the Father, who creates the universe and invites us to find our home within it. Who invites us to explore it, to cultivate it and make it our own. God welcomes us into his world and invites us to share it with Him.

But Holy Communion isn't just about Jesus inviting us to draw near and receive what he has to give. It's also about him saying to you and me, *"Aren't you going to ask me home?"* Like Zacchaeus, he prompts us to welcome him. He doesn't wait to be invited, but takes the initiative to the shy or the unconfident or the uncertain. He says, "Go on, ask me in. Welcome me into your life. See what happens." Because in Holy Communion Jesus isn't the only host - we also, in the very act of receiving those gifts of bread and wine, find ourselves in the role of host: we welcome him; we receive him; we literally take him into our bodies and our lives. The welcome is mutual and the welcome is open - *"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me," Jesus says, "and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me."*

And actually, the gospel reading at the ordination service yesterday was another passage from Matthew stressing the importance of welcome. In that passage, we heard about the parable of the sheep and the goats, where the King says to the righteous, *"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."* So by welcoming others, whether it's people who are familiar faces but we haven't yet got to know very well; people who are complete strangers; perhaps politically, people who are strangers to our country and who often receive a rather hostile or at best indifferent welcome. By welcoming others, we make space for them. And that may make all the difference between them staying as part of the church family or deciding it's not for them and heading off somewhere else. By welcoming others, we make space for God in our own lives and we may meet Jesus afresh.

And by welcoming others, we are building the bonds of community; we are helping people to be part of the body of Christ; we are welcoming people to know that they are beloved children of God. And so we're strengthening that sense of helping each other to feel we belong. And by welcoming others, we discover ourselves to be welcome.

So can I encourage you, don't miss opportunities to extend a welcome. Please have a go at practising hospitality, however modest that might look like - just going for a coffee with somebody - and you'll find that the Lord himself will be your guest.

Reading Text

Matthew 10:40-End

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.'*