

Sermon Sunday 28th June

Matthew 10: 40 – 42

Over the past few weeks our gospel readings have been offering us real-life glimpses into what God is like. We have learned that God is like that Man from Nazareth who looked out upon the crowds of people in Galilee and far from seeing what was wrong about them – what was worst about them – he saw the people through the eyes of love. He saw that they were harassed people, helpless people, sheep without a shepherd people and he had compassion upon them. This is what God is like.

God understood that these harassed, helpless and shepherdless people were not worthless chaff as society thought. Rather, they were like beautiful waves of ripening grain – getting ready to be harvested and needing to be brought into the joyful freedom and healing of the Kingdom of God. This is what God is like.

So Jesus prayed for workers to be provided. Workers to go into the towns and villages to reach these beloved people and he chose twelve people just like us – the first of millions who would be chosen – whose hearts were something like God's heart and he called them to the task. This is what God is like.

Today we are given yet another picture of what God is like as Jesus prepares his disciples to go to these God loved people. He teaches them one of the most important things there is to be learnt about God. Jesus teaches them about welcome.

How appropriate for today, when announcements have been made that our churches can now open for prayer and worship. Obviously, this will be a slow and gradual journey but our welcome as we open those doors is vital as we reflect the warmth of our loving heavenly Father to those who come. It is also an appropriate message for today as we welcome our new curates into the diocese, first as lay ministers and then, in September, as Deacons.

What is your mental picture of God? What mind-images do you see when you pray, or worship or just think about God? An old man with white hair and a beard? An amorphous Spirit whose image cannot be visually contained? A bright light of healing and wholeness? A set of principles or values? A Saviour? A Judge? A Creator?

Well, in our passage from St Matthew's Gospel Jesus gives us a picture of God that I find extremely helpful. If we begin to see God this way, it will change how we relate to both God and to others and it is all tied to the one word which is mentioned no less than six times in just three verses in Matthew 10. The word is welcome!

Let me paint for you a middle eastern portrait of this word. You have been walking in the sand blown heat of the desert for several days. Your lips are dry and cracked. Your eyes are barely able to see through the sting of the blowing sand and the flashing pain of the sun's raw brightness but even so, you make out a shape up ahead. A big, sprawling nomadic tent with camels tied to the posts in front. You quicken your pace and strain every muscle to get yourself to the tent's opening, but just as you reach it, you pause. What might be inside? Will you be caught trespassing?

Just about the time you decide that it might be better to just turn around and run for your life, the brown flap of the tent swings violently open and a man appears, raises his arm and loudly shouts 'Welcome' 'Welcome to my tent! Come inside! Let me wash your dusty feet! Let me give you food to eat! Take and drink my wine! Strike up the music! Look.... We've got company!'

Jesus teaches that God is like welcome! And so, before Jesus ever send us out to do our work amongst the harassed, helpless, shepherdless people of the world, he gives us this beautiful picture of God. Six times in just three verses he describes it – welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome.

One of the most important ministries in the Christian Church is the ministry of welcome, the ministry of hospitality. So important was it to the early Christians that they developed a belief that you should never turn away a stranger for it just might be an angel come to visit. One of the most devastating things about the last three months is that we have not really been able to exercise this ministry. Yes, we have found ways of being generous, of encouraging, or helping and offering worship, and teaching, however our ministry of hospitality has been severely hampered.

In our reading Jesus reminds us of a profound privilege, and along with that, a tremendous responsibility. He tells us that we represent, we symbolise him before others. He tells us that the reverse is also true; namely that others represent and symbolise him before us. Jesus assures us that he himself is present in our lives when we welcome others into our midst. He is also present when others do the same for us.

The early Christians had a finely tuned sense of the importance of living with a welcoming posture. They understood that only a few of them had a ministry of preaching and a few had a ministry of healing and a few had the ministry of leading, but all had the ministry of welcome.

Now if we can hold in our minds this picture of welcome, I wonder if we can now take this central thought and draw yet another scene – a picture of how the church might look as a source of God's welcome. How can our groups and committees, our gatherings and meeting places become God's welcome in the places we find ourselves?

Jesus is present each and every day in the hospitality we offer others and others offer us. Do we realise this? What a privilege and responsibility? What a challenge! What a joy, gift and blessing!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* 'The bearers of Jesus's word receive a final word of promise for their work. They are now Christ's fellow workers and will be like him in all things. Thus, they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if there were Christ himself. When they are welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them. They are bearers of his presence. They bring with them the most precious gift in the world the gift of Jesus Christ. And with them they bring God the Father, and that means indeed forgiveness and salvation, life and bliss. This is the reward of their toil and suffering. Every service people render them is service rendered to Christ himself. This means grace for the church and grace for the disciple in equal measure. The church will be readier to give them its service and honour, for with them the Lord himself has entered into their midst.'

When Jesus spoke his words about welcome, he was using a way of speaking which his audience would understand. Those around always felt that to receive a person's envoy or messenger was the same as to receive the person themselves. To welcome with love the messenger of a friend was to welcome the friend themselves. In this passage we can see set out the links in the chain of salvation. In that chain there are four links. There is God out of whose love the whole process of salvation began. There is Jesus who brought that message to humankind. There is the human messenger, the prophet who speaks, the good person who is an example, the disciples who learn, who in turn passes on to others the good news which they themselves have received. Finally, there is the believer who welcomes God's person and God's message and who then find life in all its fullness.

The passage from Matthew 10 calls us to a mutual ministry of welcome. Each with our own particular calling and all needed as we share hospitality together. We have now a huge opportunity as we begin to connect with people physically again to offer that welcome.

There have been many around us over the last few months, kind of dipping their toes into the waters of faith, maybe because others in their family have been connecting online, maybe because they need connection for themselves and the current situation has awakened their faith. Going forward we have the opportunity to be Christ to these people, to draw them in, to offer invitation, to share with them the gifts and blessing which God has given to us.

Many who have studied churches over the years and would classify them as healthy and growing have observed that the majority of them are friendly churches which offer hospitality. They are churches that live by the principle: there are no strangers here, only friends whom we have not met.

Most of us do not find it too difficult to offer hospitality to our family and friends, but what about the stranger, the homeless, the lonely, those who are different from ourselves? The Black Lives Matter campaign has highlighted for all of us the fact that we can all do better at welcome. Do we give everyone the gift of Christ's presence? Do we have eyes of faith to see in others Christ's presence to us?

Hospitality is not just something we do in church though, or in our homes. Welcome, Jesus says, comes from our hearts. It is a sign of being a Christian. Jesus' true disciples have welcoming hearts because it is a kingdom sign.

I welcome you. You welcome me and together we welcome God and the world. And when others welcome us into their lives – whether its because they know we stand for God, or simply because we are a good person and fun to be with, or even because they see that we are thirsty and they take pity on us and give us a drink – something divine happens to them. Jesus says God rewards them. He teaches that God blesses them. He announces that God touches their lives when others welcome us.

Not only must we learn to practice the art of welcome in our lives, but you and I must also work on developing our own welcome-ability. Learning to love people, learning not to judge people, learning to listen to others without needing to give an answer. Asking ourselves when we are with others 'What does this person need from me at this moment? Do they need reassurance? To be told that they are forgiven? Do they need me to laugh at their story? Do they need me to cry with them in their sadness? All these practices are part of just being there – which is the most important welcome-able skill of all. Remember our presence brings the resources of heaven to other peoples' lives.

So as we welcome our new curates into the diocese; as we begin to step out of our homes and back into our church buildings; as we begin to open up our doors for people to come in; as we connect again we are called to welcome all as Christ did. Not only that but we are challenged to broaden our welcome to those who were not part of our lives and our churches before, for whatever reason, and let us remember that the giving and receiving of hospitality is the best gift of all because it is the presence of Christ himself.

'Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'