

Sermon 26-6-11 – Matthew 10:40-42

‘Welcome’

We hear a lot about this in the church.

We talk about welcoming **committees** – about **greeters** – about being a **welcoming** church.

The passage from Matthew read today uses the word six times in three short verses.

‘Welcome’

When I glanced at the subject in choosing the hymns a few weeks ago, I thought that this was a no brainer.

Then I began last night to really look at the passage and the whole subject was much more complex.

First there is also this little word, **‘reward’**.

I have a strong aversion to that word when it comes to my faith.

It smells of a ‘brownie point’ religion which behaves a certain way in order to reap the benefits.

This is dangerous territory and does not fit in with the great commandment to love.

Because of this paradox, I had to dig deeper.

First one needs to look at these verses in the context of what comes before.

The disciples are asked by Jesus to act as his envoys, extending his ministry, proclaiming the same good news and performing the same works of healing that he is doing.

His further instructions make it clear that the disciples are also to share in his poverty and homelessness, taking with them no money or extra clothing, and depending solely on the hospitality of others for shelter and sustenance.

They are told that they will not be welcomed everywhere, and they can expect to experience the same hostility Jesus often did, for he was sending them out "like sheep into the midst of wolves".

They can expect to encounter persecution and trials, for *"a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master"*.

They need also be prepared for painful division within families, and to be willing to put Jesus' mission above family loyalties.

For all of this risk and suffering, Jesus promises, *"those who lose their life for my sake will find it"*.

The **reward** that the disciples are promised is not **comfort** but **hardship**.

It is not a way into heaven, it is **suffering and rejection**.

In fact it is what we hear today – a **prophet's** reward.

You just need to look at the lives of the prophets in the Old Testament to see what **that** led to – usually death.

OK!

Now the call of the disciples and **our** call to spread the Good News is beginning to sound not so attractive!

If I have to actually **suffer** for my faith then you can keep your reward!

Yet many around the world live with that every day and I hope Jacquie continues to educate you in this area.

It is not a **comfortable** faith we have and the reward is **nothing** like winning the lottery.

It is about **suffering and sacrifice**.

So let's get back to that word **'welcome'**.

We **are** a welcoming church here – aren't we?

Well I must say we are not bad at this.

I never managed while I was here, though, to get a **greeter's** team organized.

It is a very **special** ministry devoted to spotting those in need when they come in the door and seeing that their needs are met.

It is far more than being a sidesperson and handing out bulletins – they have their **own** ministry to see that the service runs smoothly.

If you want to know more about this ministry ask those who attended the conference a few years ago on the 'Magnetic Church.'

Welcome.

It's such a common word.

It adorns floor mats outside all sorts of entryways.

It's often on road signs as one enters a new state, a new town.

There are places where people offer "welcome" as a greeting.

"Welcome to Wal-Mart!"

"Good evening and welcome – table for two?"

While we use the word casually and commercially, making one welcome is not as simple as offering a word, though it often **starts** there.

The art of making one welcome is rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality.

Preparing to welcome someone takes thought, intention and discipline.

Some are **masters** of the art.

Their very presence seems to wipe away the strangeness or awkwardness of social greeting and make one feel as if they are home.

If you've ever received such hospitality, you know exactly what I mean.

Perhaps the measure of **true** welcome is the ability of the host to make the guest feel at home.

There are some places where one can go and **always** feel at home.

It may look different.

It may smell different.

It may be full of strangers.

But, somehow, it just **feels** like home, and it is good to be there.

For Jews and Christians, hospitality has always been a part of who we are.

The call to welcome the stranger is anchored in the Torah and was a part of the measure of the Hebrew community's faithfulness to God.

When a traveler came to town, they waited by the well, and the townspeople had to house and feed the visitor for the night.

Of course, these travelers were **rarely** family.

These were folks unknown to the community.

They were aliens, often foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, different gods.

Opening one's home was risky.

The Don Valley Refugees take this risk even now as they welcome the Azawe family arriving tomorrow from Syria.

Yet such hospitality was central to the Hebrew identity and should be central to **our** faith.

Risk did not define these people; hospitality did because they knew such hospitality was central to the character of their God.

Hospitality is one of the main missions of the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine who follow the Benedictine Rule.

One article on monastic spirituality said that only people who are basically at home, and at home in themselves, can offer hospitality...hospitality has a way of breaking through our insularity.

But let's get back to the text.

Jesus, in today's gospel, is not talking about standing at the door of the synagogue and making friends with those who come in the door.

He is not even talking about the disciples welcoming the stranger into their homes.

He is taking about **ministry** and behaviour in our **everyday lives** and not just to our own but to all – even those he calls the little ones.

I spoke a couple of weeks ago about becoming Pentecostal Christians.

We need to now examine ourselves to see if we are Welcoming Christians.

Matthew assumes that the church is a "**sent**" church, a **missionary** church.

There is simply no other way **to be** the church!

In these post-Christendom days, this understanding is being recovered with the missional church movement.

There is growing awareness that mission is not just a program of the church; it is (or ought to be) the defining purpose of everything we do as Christians

What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come on their own initiative through our church doors, and instead took seriously **our** calling to bring the gospel to **them**?

What would happen if we **truly** believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighbourhood we enter?

What would happen if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for the neighbour?

Those who welcome and care for the needs of "little ones" welcome and care for Jesus himself.

Welcoming is not so simple after all. Amen