

Sermon for 28th June 2020 Trinity 3

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

All are welcome! In our churches we live by that phrase because all are always welcome to join us in all our services and activities and in general the life of our church particularly here in our parish of Capel and Ockley. There is a lovely hymn which is called 'Let us build a house' It goes something like this:

'Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place'

I love that hymn! And it is with great joy that I can confirm that we will be resuming services in both our churches next Sunday the 5th of July! You are indeed most welcome but government restrictions mean only a maximum of 30 worshippers in one place, socially distanced of course, and with appropriate hand cleansing, face covering possibly....

So rather ironically I cannot say 'all are welcome' which feels so wrong and goes so much against the grain and what we as church are all about! Yet I am sure between our two church buildings, the beautiful St Margaret's where I am today and St John's at Capel, we can truly welcome you all! All will be welcome! You will be contacted with more details about how we plan to do this shortly!

I have enjoyed and really appreciated the last three week's sermons by our diocesan bishops who have given us some inspiring food for thought around what I think has been a fairly difficult discourse in Matthew, often known as the mission discourse. As we have heard over the last weeks Jesus has been preparing his disciples to go out only to whom Jesus calls 'the lost sheep of Israel'. Our very short gospel reading this morning - 2 verses in all - concludes Jesus' teaching on the disciples' first solo mission by these words 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me'. Here he stresses the close identification between Father God, Jesus himself, those who go in his name, and those who receive his followers in the right spirit. 'Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me'.

Jesus has fully prepared his disciples to go out into the world with his message and we have had words of guidance, warning and promise. Now, just before the disciples depart with nothing but the clothes they are

standing up in, come words of reassurance and hope. But these words are not for the disciples themselves.

Jesus explains that anyone who welcomes one of his disciples receives Jesus himself and by extension, his heavenly Father. The reward for such hospitality is not for the disciples but for those who welcome them. Whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet's reward - actually we might not want one of their rewards, since most of the real prophets were rejected. There is a reward for the righteous too it seems, in fact any small act of kindness or thoughtfulness brings overwhelming rewards, because God's work is a reward in itself. The reward for a faithful disciple is not something that can be measured in human terms. St Paul describes this in his letter to the Romans on the reading sheet for today. The disciple is rewarded by a deepening relationship with God and an experience of God's love and spiritual gifts. And this reward, freely given is more fulfilling than any material incentives. Although we don't hear about the outcome of this first mission in Matthew's gospel, in Luke's account we hear that some seventy disciples were sent out and returned from their mission, elated and energised.

The thing is the gospel doesn't necessarily spread by itself. Christianity is not a philosophy that can be learned separately from those who embody it. I suppose you could learn about the Christian faith in theory but the truth that is Christ is not a truth that could be learnt in principle. If it was we wouldn't need apostles. The way that the gospel is known is by one person being for another person the story of Christ. That's a rather wonderful thing really isn't it. The gospel is known by one person being for another person the story of Jesus. A bit scary really if you think that's meant to be us?! Yet Jesus tells us that the disciples are not expected to be him, but rather we are to be like the teacher - it is a likeness that is required.

And in certain places and contexts, a likeness to Jesus won't be liked at all and certainly won't be welcomed and Jesus has given us those instructions and advice in the whole of this chapter. Shake off the dust! Shake the dust off your feet! I can see Bishop Jo with her walking boots doing that now - shake, shake shake! Travel light. I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. Do not worry about how you are to speak - the Spirit of your Father will speak through you. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered; Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.

Yes, the word of God is divisive and will bring disunity before it can bring peace. Bonhoeffer (famous theologian murdered at the hand of the Nazis said this: "The cross is God's sword on this earth."

but these final words in our gospel reading today are to be heard as words of promise. Jesus is telling his disciples as it were “I am sending you into a dangerous world as part of my mission to love, save, bless and be reconciled to that very world. It is dangerous out there. But you will find welcome. Those who welcome and receive you, also welcome and receive me - and they will be rewarded.”

What then does this mean for us? Is our world around us in Capel and Ockley that dangerous do you imagine? Well, hopefully not, although we all have reservations about going into the world as Covid restrictions are lifted. But there is danger in our wider society isn't there, in the violence we have seen in a city park this week..... but we have to get out there don't we. Our economy needs us to use the services on offer, to travel, to consume, to live our lives. The same is true of our ministry. We have always believed in our parish that our ministry is as much out of our church building as it is within. The last 12 weeks have shown just how that has been reimaged and recreated. In a sense we have been unburdened of our church buildings in a sense, we have travelled light as we have lived through this pandemic. Although the pandemic or worry of it has been a huge burden in itself...

In this time of coronavirus, hospitality, like just about everything else, can't be quite what it was. We haven't been able to invite people into our homes or into our churches. We can't give them a hug. But that hasn't meant we have not been welcoming - the challenge is to find inventive ways of telling people that they matter, of sharing the basics in life, giving reassurance and comfort and opening our hearts. Something as simple as a picture in the window, to make people smile as they pass by. For in each welcoming gesture, we welcome God.

Of course, as we try to share our faith in our own ways, not all will welcome us but many people have and will welcome us. If we can offer ourselves up as the guest for people to welcome, we will be manifesting for these people the blessings of both our father in heaven and also his beloved Son. Just imagine that!