

Sunday 2nd July 2023; Trinity 4. Benefice BCP HC Stonegrave.

In many of our larger places of worship when you enter you may be met by a 'greeter'. Their job is to welcome you! Hopefully with a smile and with a sense of hospitality! To welcome someone is to do just that, to meet and greet someone in a warm and friendly way.

A building can be a place of welcome if its door is unlocked, certainly a church, and my hope is this wonderful place can be open every day. As a chaplain in the hospitals if I was on my own in the office, I always ensured the door was open and I greeted people as they walked by.

All these things offer welcome, not so difficult you might think, but sadly I guess we can all think of examples when the opposite of welcome is shown, being ignored, or cast away, or looked at sternly or have our own offer of welcome rejected. Do our words begin a sentence with a negative? 'You don't do that...'. or 'We can't do that...' or 'We shouldn't do that...' How often do we come over as negative, critical, inhospitable, and unwelcoming?

Yet, in our Gospel today Matthew challenges us with words of promise and the assurance and reward of victory. Jesus says he would count all honour and affection shown to his disciples as shown also to Himself, and through Him to His Father. Anyone who welcomes the apostles welcomes Him, and anyone who welcomes Him welcomes the one who sent Him, even with just a cup of cold water.

In ancient times, it was understood that in showing hospitality, one welcomed not just an individual, but implicitly, the community who sent the person and all that they represent. Therefore, welcoming a disciple of Jesus would mean receiving the very presence of Jesus Himself and of the one who sent him, God the Father.

By the same token, if you or I welcome someone, it is not just you

or I but our family, community or church welcoming them too. Even more, it is our Christian faith and all that means that is represented and demonstrated in whatever welcome and hospitality we offer. In both receiving and offering welcome, we welcome Christ and in that we receive the reward that is God's blessing.

What would happen if we took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to others demonstrated in welcome and hospitality? What would happen if we truly believed that we reveal 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 our neighbour?

We may not always receive such a positive response when we take the risk of reaching out, yet we may be surprised at how ready many are to receive our most humble efforts. Lest we forget what we have to offer, we have Jesus' promise: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." Ultimately, they are welcoming God. We do the mission, aid, and service we are called to because they are invitations for us and for those we minister to—invitations to connect with the very presence of God, to welcome God into their lives and situations for healing, curing, restoration and so much more. The disciples, albeit imperfectly and wavering at times, welcomed Jesus to lead their lives. Now, as they follow his leadership in word and deed, they will show their trustworthiness to the communities God sends them to—and thereby be living and breathing opportunities for people to welcome God into their own lives again.

Similarly, we are not required to be a great saint to receive a great saint's reward but have only to show hospitality and welcome. The smallest gift to the least disciple brings its reward, blessing. Just as God knows and cares about every hair of our heads, so also God knows every generous act we do for someone else. Such gifts are

counted as gifts to Jesus—and gifts to Jesus are counted as gifts to the Father. Jesus therefore establishes a direct line of blessing from the least actions of welcome to an individual, to God Himself.

I alluded to a modern Christian song last week, called ‘Speak Life’ and here are some of the words, “When you speak life with the words you say, raise your thoughts a little higher. Use your words to inspire. Joy will fall like rain when you speak life with the things you say.”

This is the welcome Jesus speaks of, the hospitable heart, that speaks life and is shown in welcome and care. It is not just in the giving but also in the receiving because God ordains that our receiving will also become a blessing to the giver. To receive the warmth of a welcome, the offer of generous hospitality, unreservedly and graciously, is also always to receive blessing, to receive life.

Thanks be to God. Amen