

Rector's Sermon: 28 June

“Jesus said, ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’”

The message we hear in this morning’s gospel reading from Matthew was important enough to Jesus and to the early church that some variation on this theme shows up in each gospel, and often more than once. So we have in Matthew’s gospel from chapter 18 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...” and from chapter 25 “The king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me.’” Mark includes similar verses. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus declares that “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” The Jesus in John’s gospel, in true poetic style, declares in chapter 13 “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

There are numerous other examples and variations throughout the New Testament. The bottom-line emphasis seems to be on inclusion, reciprocity, welcome and doing for others—all those things it takes to build up community, to include the stranger as well as neighbour. If we can believe the message inherent in today’s Gospel and in so many other passages, Jesus and the early disciples and later apostles put a high value on welcoming and proclaiming the presence of God thereby.

Just pause for a moment and think about what we’ve been hearing through all the pandemic and the ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign about division, exclusion, inequality.

There may be legitimate and compelling reasons to consider the economic impact or national safety issues in such things, but if an inhospitable, exclusive attitude goes along with these ideas, then they are totally at odds with the teachings of Jesus who talked so very much about welcome, inclusion, hospitality.

Hospitality is a primary ethic of the cultures and peoples of the Middle East. Bernie and I have been on the receiving end of this every time we have been to the Holy Land. Whether one is brought into a family home of Muslims, Christians or Jews, there is joy in welcoming, there is the belief that it is desired of God, the welcoming of strangers who are strangers no longer, but beloved friends, believing that in welcoming people into one’s home they are earning their crown in heaven, doing as God would have them do in welcoming the living God among us.

Such an understanding of hospitality, of the obligation of welcome, dates back to well before the time of Jesus. It was a matter of survival and community health which translated into the religious understanding of what God wants of us. Where and how do we experience such welcome today in our culture?

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Is this what we hear? Or do we hear, instead, words of separation, words of breaking relationship, words of opposition and repudiation?

So many of the ugly attitudes playing out on the world stage and in the evening news have spilled over into our popular culture, showing up in a variety of television shows that revel in the diminishing of the other – just think of *The Weakest Link* or *I’m a Celebrity*, or *Love Island* or *Big Brother* - these attitudes of the diminishment of the other reflect back to us our own society, showing up in stepped-up immigration strictures and deportation raids, among other things.

Where is our witness to welcoming others, and thereby welcoming Jesus and the one who sent him?

This Sunday falls the day before the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, two of the most if not the most influential figures in Christendom. Let’s just reflect on Peter and Paul for a moment. They did not agree on many things, they probably didn’t get along at all, and finally went their separate ways in the proclamation of the Gospel. Peter insisted that the early believers must follow Jewish ways, must be circumcised, must hold to the Law. Paul’s vision led him to distant lands proclaiming faith in a risen Christ and urging believers to conform their lives to that faith. What they had in common, though, was the conviction that God had visited humanity in Jesus, and that Jesus had brought something new and remarkable to humankind demonstrated in a way to live, a way to relate and a way to witness to God’s love. And they both understood that the welcome of God was an invitation to a place in God’s kingdom. Without both of their witness we would not be worshipping today.

We may believe differently about details of faith, as Peter and Paul certainly did and as Christians are wont to do. We may understand civic responsibility differently; We have and always will hold a variety of opinions on things.

But for us as Christians, the question of the day growing out of our gospel asks: What does it mean to welcome, and how do we do that? What does it look like in our churches, in our neighbourhoods, in our national policies, in our very attitudes? For we are Christians first, as citizens of God’s kingdom, living that faith in a Western context of privilege and challenge.

Jesus didn’t say that we have to agree on everything, but he absolutely clear to be welcoming. Like Peter and Paul, we won’t all agree on everything. Christian people are called to be welcoming, for in welcoming others we welcome God. Can we at least agree on that?

As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, when we welcome strangers, we may be entertaining angels unaware.

Today we have two joyful reasons to welcome! First today we welcome Daniel as our curate. It was wonderful to be with him, on Zoom, yesterday as he made his initial promises before his ordination which will be on the 16th September. We welcome him because we are so excited at the gifts he has to share. We welcome him because we are excited to be the community through which he explores his vocation as an ordained priest in God's Church and we welcome him because his presence further strengthens our desire and ability to be light in the dark places and to be Good News for our parish and local community.

We are also welcoming people back into the church this evening after three months of lockdown. The doors will be open for visitors to come and pray silently in this beautiful sacramental space where our local community have gathered to worship and said their prayers for generations and where the very walls are saturated with their prayers and presence. This feels a very different kind of welcome, because though we are thrilled that the doors are open once again we are also very aware of our responsibility to ensure, to the very best of our ability, the safety of all who are visiting. Therefore, though our welcome has no limits, it does have boundaries – people will have to follow protocols to ensure the flourishing of all.

So the very first physical act of worship that Daniel and I will be sharing in will be the blessing of the church as we reopen our doors once again. How wonderful that these two acts of welcome coincide with one another, both wonderful gifts and signs of God's abundant grace.

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Remember that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; enabled or disabled, black or white, gay or straight, old or young, or any other binary for that matter, for we all find our full identity in Christ Jesus.

Let us ensure that our welcome mirrors Christ's welcome, so that as God's Church we may never be a barrier to God's overwhelming embrace, for without our neighbour present and flourishing we are not and will never truly be the Body of Christ. Amen.