

Trinity 17

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace. May I speak in the name of the God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome. Just a word, one word. But it holds such power and meaning. A word that holds memories and stories of our many experiences of welcome. Some full of joy and comfort, of times and places when we have been welcomed in just the way we most needed. But some of us might also carry memories and stories, where a welcome became empty, a broken promise that has maybe left us with painful wounds and memories. Welcome. What memories and stories of welcome do you carry? What memories and stories of welcome do we hold here at St Margaret's?

Whom do we welcome? Who does God welcome? Those are a couple questions that are central to the second part of our gospel reading today. As seems to be the way of human beings all over the world and through all of history, Jesus' disciples are quibbling over who among them is the greatest. Who matters more? Who is to be treated with the most respect and honour? The person with the most money? Or the person with the most powerful job? The person with the biggest house? Or the person with the highest education? Who is the greatest?

Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all, and servant of all.

Jesus challenges the standards which often determine, who is the greatest, who most deserves our welcome and whom God most gladly welcomes. Our status, our bank account, our jobs, where we live or

what kind of education we have doesn't matter before God. These things do not make us more or less worthy in the eyes of God. God looks at our hearts. Are we willing to serve God and any and all we encounter with love and care?

Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all, and servant of all.

But what does that have to do with welcome, why does Jesus then go on to put a child at the centre of the conversation with the words:

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

Jesus did this at a time when children had no rights and little protection in the form of laws. Children were even more vulnerable than they are today. Their voices and thoughts would have rarely been considered within society. Children were some of the most powerless people within any community.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

Jesus identifies with a vulnerable, powerless child. If we want to welcome Jesus, if we want to welcome God, we are to welcome children and all who in some way might be vulnerable or disempowered. This tells us something about how power works in the Kingdom of God. Mainly that it works very differently from how it works in the world as it is. In the world as it is, how much money, what kind of job and education we have, determines how much power we have. Our gender,

ethnicity, our sexual orientation, class, our age and our physical abilities significantly affect how much power we have. But the Kingdom of God is different.

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In the Kingdom of God, it doesn't matter how much power we might be able to hold, or how disempowered we are through the injustices of this world. What truly matters, is how willing we are to humbly serve any and all, no matter their perceived status in this world. How we welcome people, children and any and all who are disempowered and made vulnerable due to the injustices of this world, is the measure of how truly great we are.

But what does it mean to welcome someone? Back there, high on the wall is a painting of Jesus with children and the words written underneath:

Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

I have to admit when I first read this, I had a little chuckle to myself. Suffer, suffer little children to come unto me. But the thing is, welcoming others can sometimes mean a bit of suffering for us. Because we might find it a bit more difficult to engage with worship, because of the added liveliness of children in the space.

God's welcome of us is radical and spacious. It doesn't demand of us to be a certain way, to conform and fit in with what is the status quo. God welcomes us as we are, each one of us with our particular stories,

our particular strengths and weaknesses, our cultures, our bodies, our needs and our particular gifts. All of us is welcome at God's table. And as God radically welcomes each and every one of us, God also teaches us to live out that radical welcome with all those who cross our paths.

The thing is, welcome is not an easy thing, like it says up there, sometimes it might involve a little "suffering". Welcome is costly, inconvenient and uncomfortable at times. Welcome means we have to make space for the other. Welcome means we have to allow for each person, who enters here, to shape and change who we are and who we are becoming as a community. Radical welcome means, we cannot ask people to park parts of themselves at the door. All of us is welcome at God's table.

I have only just arrived, but everywhere I turn I am noticing, that welcoming all and welcoming well is already deeply important to the community here at St Margaret's. I am so grateful for the wonderful and generous welcome I have received here since the day I moved into the rectory. One of my sisters, who watched the service online in Uganda last Sunday, texted me later to say how touched she had been to get a real sense of welcome for me from the community here at St Margaret's. So, thank you, your welcome means a lot to me. And it is my hope and prayer that, like in one of my favourite hymns that we sung last Sunday, we will together continue to build a house where love can dwell, and as it says in the last few lines:

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafters:

All are welcome, all are welcome,

All are welcome in this place.

Amen.