

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 3 (28 June)

Matthew 10:40-end

It seems somewhat apt that the word 'welcome' appears to dominate today's short extract from Matthew, given that the churches of our country are indeed trying their best to 'welcome' people back into their folds. Of course, no one has been spiritually excluded during this 'lockdown' period, but all have been forced out of their bases. No church has been able to 'welcome' anyone through its doors since March – but now, to a degree, we can – and with that, we can restore a physical sense of 'welcome'.

Here at St. Mark's, the Churchwarden and a small team are putting together some ideas for meeting the government's 'relaxation' (dated mid-June) that we can open our doors – and prepare our buildings – for private individual prayer. Since that change, a further 'relaxation' of the regulations has been announced for mid-July, whereby we can – if able to meet Covid-19's strict requirements – begin to offer some kind of "public" worship. We are awaiting the details on this, so more may well be said later. For now, the sense of 'welcome' echoed in our scripture will be seen in the quiet of offering each of you some private time within the building for your own individual prayer. We hope you will find this of use.

"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me," says the author of Matthew, and from that phrase opens up a sequence of images that drive home the one underlying core message that is our Christian faith: that through ourselves comes an image of Christ-at-work, and from that, the promise of God's intervention into our lives. That most fundamental of principles to the Christian faith we believe so succinctly summed up by the simple task of making someone 'welcome' in our lives. Like the notion that it takes fewer muscles and energy to smile than to frown at someone, so it takes nothing more than the kindness of 'welcome' to include another in the joy of faith. If only it were that simple!

It could be, of course – and we hope it is. We hope that those tiny blips of distrust, outrage, mood swings, temper tantrums and the like are precisely that, a mere blip. We hope that they simply remind us of our human frailty – and we hope that they jar us into realising the greater benefit of being civil, of being kind, of being concerned, of wanting to reflect Christ in our lives. Of wanting to say "welcome" and not "p--- off!" When we do open our Church doors once again (and we may have already done it by the time you read this ...), we want that symbolism to say a clear 'welcome' to all who seek it.

Inevitably, we will not know quite who they are, but that should not matter. There may be familiar faces, there may be close friends; there may be unfinished conversations, there may be mutual tasks to complete; and there may be the stranger, the curious, the seeker. To these must indeed be offered a sense of 'welcome'. To the sojourner of scripture should come a 'welcome' of infinite proportion from those who claim to be Christ-like. Exciting times ahead, new adventures to be had, renewed energy levels sought. To those of us who were once at the core of a pre-"Coronavirus" church, a cry for the future! Look toward it, embrace its hopes, and ensure its fate.

Without such a sense of 'welcome' runs the risk of being worthless. Scripture offers a cup of water – we need to symbolically understand this action (although Covid-19 rules will prevent it actually happening, due to the contamination threat). The consciousness required to see the thirst in the eyes, to see the weariness in stature, to see the need personified should reach for the cup, reach for the tap; and in reaching, to reach out. Reach out with the cup, with the water – and reach out to the individual. Reach out and say "welcome". Welcome to the world that we believe God inhabits within us – a world of love, care and compassion. A world indeed of 'welcome'.

New and potentially exciting challenges lay ahead. Research by the Church of England has suggested that there has been a positive twist to this 'lockdown' era, a twist that has brought 'hundreds' more to a curiosity of faith, and a possible desire to seek more. As churches throughout have adapted to being virtual, have developed online services and features, have embraced the social-media platforms, they have discovered a renaissance of interest. Statistics are revealing large interest in the welcoming invitation of such methods, with some churches recording vastly increased 'congregations'. It is thought that most of these will not necessarily equate to "bums-on-pews" when the doors do re-open, but they will still need to be catered for, and ministered to. Even before the virus turned our world upside-down, the majority of enquirers were coming through our website platforms. People in this technological era simply do not do the 'physical' it would seem – walking into church is no longer the only way to God in the twenty-first century; the new prophets of faith can come via a laptop, tablet or smartphone.

We will need to address this. A pixelated cup of water will have to exist. Whilst of course nothing beats a friendly face, a warm embrace, a communal setting, a holy environment, all will need to be made to feel that God is indeed making them 'welcome'. Our expressions of our faith, as individuals and as a corporate entity, are vital to the future and its relevance. We do indeed look forward to welcoming each and every one as we swing doors – both real and virtual – wide open in the name of a God whose hospitality promises much. Let Matthew drive that point home, for "truly I tell you, none will lose their reward."

Fr. Ian