

St Brandon's, Sermon for 2nd July 2017

Matthew 10. 40-42 (Jeremiah 28.5-9; Romans 6.12-23)

Welcome

Alison Hobbs

Are you a welcoming person? If we have to describe ourselves, perhaps for a job application, we would be wanting to put something like that about ourselves, wouldn't we? Its something we all know is important and would want to get right, but perhaps the reality is that some of us are better at it than others.

When I was starting my training as a curate, Rick would emphasise the importance of a good welcome at the beginning of a service: you know the bit I mean, it happens every week as a 'personal' welcome before the 'liturgical' words of welcome, which together form part of the 'gathering' – the coming together as a body ready to worship together.

Rick and I would discuss why that mattered, and the subject would come up each year because, you guessed it, it turned out to be a lot harder for me to achieve that bit than some of the rest.

Why? I'm not sure. There is something about being in the position of welcoming that makes us vulnerable, at least, as I experience it. The welcomer has something that they are offering to the incomer, typically, their home and hospitality.

Or in the church setting, this place and this time of worship. Perhaps the vulnerability is a fear that what we offer will not be good enough, so there is a lack of confidence because we are afraid of being rejected or spurned:

they may excuse themselves early and never come again.

Or perhaps someone has presented themselves to us because they want or need something and in the light of that, we may be afraid that we will be asked for more than we have to offer, either because we don't have more or because we are reluctant to be pushed to give it.

An air of self-protection creeps into the welcome and it is heard as tentative, guarded, hostile even.

That does not constitute a good or true welcome!

I wonder what the recipe is for a good and true welcome?

We will each bring our own experiences to bear on this but some of the ingredients I think are needed are a genuine sense of pleasure and approval, acceptance and openness to seeing this person in a gracious light.

(as I wrote that phrase I was put in mind of the way candle light always flatters the complexion, so like candle-light we regard them gently, with compassion, and readiness to see the more beautiful side of them.

We can only do that if we are sufficiently confident that we hold ourselves in that same kind of regard, and are gentle and accepting of who we are: neither better nor worse than this person, different, but equally acceptable in our different, unique way of being who we are.

Equally loved by God.

Then there is the equality of the context.

We are welcoming or being welcomed *to* something or somewhere.

Imagine we are meeting a friend for a coffee and we have arrived first.

When our friend arrives, there may be a moment of us 'owning' the place because we have

settled in already but that soon dissipates and evens up.

Its a lot more difficult to create the same easiness when its home to one of you: that's what I mean by 'equality' in the context of welcoming.

The necessary ingredient is something about a willingness to meet the other person's need to feel comfortable, to be put at ease, it requires us to restrain from playing power games where the power is one of ownership and belonging:

perhaps the true welcome is to truly allow the other to belong to this space for this time. To equally 'own' your house with you for the duration of their visit.

What can we gain or give in a welcome?

Jesus tells the twelve disciples that

“whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Now here is a new ingredient thrown into the recipe:

recognition of each other as fellow seekers and dwellers of the Holy Spirit; the ability to see the likeness of Christ in another, and be prepared to shine the light of your own faith in the way you meet and respond to another.

What might that look like in reality?

I think this is a bit what Jesus goes on to try to explain:

when you meet another person, look for the special quality in them, what is it about them that speaks to you of their Christian values?

It may be that they are especially gifted in compassion, and listen to you in a way that makes you feel very valued and healed.

It may be that they have the gift of evangelism and you are shown how God is at work around you so what you *had* thought was a rather ordinary day, now is blessed with the promise of God in it.

It may be the gift of wisdom, and you come away feeling clearer in your head and relieved of a gnawing anxiety.

It may be the gift of prophesy, and you come away having heard some words intentionally or incidentally said that speak into your situation and your trajectory in life.

It may be the gift of righteousness, and you come away with a renewed sense of being loved by God, and wanting to respond with purpose and firmness in your resolve to act well and live a godly life.

No gift is too small to matter: a simple card with a greeting,

a message of sympathy inadequately expressing our loving concern, even a cup of cold water offered at the right time changes, for the recipient, the way life looks for a while, tells them they are safe in the love of others, acting in and through the love of God.

We sense that their loving action is inspired by their love of God and their being loved by God and that in turn makes us appreciate all over again how loving is our God to us, too.

We find God all over again in and through the love of others.

The likeness of Jesus is to be seen in the practical 'alongside-ness' of a loving Christian.

Whoever welcomes a disciple welcomes the Jesus in them, and whoever welcomes Jesus

welcomes God.

For those who are without faith, to witness or experience the depth of Christian love freely offered could be life-changing.

If the encounter has all the ingredients of a good and true welcome, they just might find themselves touched and welcomed by God, that's how much it matters!

So how can we welcome others into our church in a way that truly allows them, too, to welcome Christ-who-is-God?

Well, if I knew the answer, or if anyone knew the answer, our churches would be full! But I do see and hear evidence of faith nurtured initially through welcome.

Not limited to the greeting at the church door with the books, though that is a good start. But a welcome that allows the incomer to be regarded as an equal, as entitled to belong equally in this space for the duration – that is, if we are giving a true and good welcome.

That allows for the possibility that this incomer, perhaps of little or no faith, is nonetheless gifted by God with a message for us that we must attend to with humility if we are not to miss it.

That is a tall order and more than I can remember to rise to.

But thank heavens for grace: that extraordinary, unexpected chance we are so often given and so often miss to give a smile, right word or action at a key moment.

We need courage and conviction to act on the promptings we get, that 'nudge' we feel prompting us to say or do something when we ourselves feel rather at a loss, or intending to stay quiet.

When we ignore the nudge, or think about it too long, the moment is lost, the world returns to normal and the grace is missed: the instance in which hospitality and welcome can be demonstrated, in which God gets the opportunity to visit, even if they don't see it this time, or next time, one time they might see him if we go on welcoming, in his name, for his sake.

And so let's pray with a mix of words from our readings today:

*Lord, in all our encounters,
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service
such that our welcome
may demonstrate your loving-kindness,
proclaim your faithfulness,
and declare your love for all,
Amen*