

**Trinity 4****Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23**

Thank you for your warm welcome this morning.

It is a particular joy to be here with you for two reasons:

- a) to say thank you for hosting ordinands on placements
- b) I was at Cranmer in the late 1990s and I remember hearing about the fire in the church. It is wonderful to see the way the church has re-emerged from that tragic event.

I shall begin the sermon by reading an extract from the Rule of Benedict. The rule was a series of instructions and guidelines about how to order the monastic life. It was drawn up by St. Benedict in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and played a huge role in the shaping of monastic life in western Europe. The monastic community which was based at Durham Cathedral used the Rule of Benedict as their rule of life.

*Rule of Benedict. Ch 66: 'At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. This porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them. As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies 'Thanks be to God' or 'Your blessing, please'; then, with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love.'*

On one level, this is a practical arrangement. Every monastery needs someone who will stay near the entrance way to answer all those knocks on the door, at whatever time of day or night. However, on another more fundamental level, this is about something more important. This rule is about how a visitor is to be welcomed to the monastery. The ethos of the monastery, its purpose and character should be demonstrated by the porter on the very threshold of the monastery. The porter must respond with love. He must call out 'Deo Gratias', or 'Thanks be to God' as a way of expressing gratitude to God for the person who has knocked on the door. He must ask the guest for a blessing, a way of saying that the one who comes is in himself a blessing, a gift from God, a guest who has something to give whatever his condition or status.

The welcome continues when the guest has entered the monastery. Elsewhere in the Rule of Benedict (ch. 53), Benedict wrote that *'all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt 25:35)... All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival or departure. By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them... Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly[,] Christ is received...'*

Please forgive me for quoting this at length. I do so because what St. Benedict is expressing is both extraordinary but also deep-rooted in our faith, even now. I remember a great-aunt of mine saying some years ago, in a conversation about faith that 'Christ often comes in the guise of a stranger.' I doubt very much whether my great-aunt would have known about the Rule of Benedict or much of Christian history, but she put a finger upon something which is fundamental in our faith: we are to welcome and receive God's blessing, Christ Himself, in the guests and strangers who come to us.

The roots of this conviction go back to the Bible and especially the gospels. The Rule of Benedict itself quotes from the famous parable in Matthew 25: *'I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

And it also goes back to our gospel reading this morning. It is a short reading which begins with Jesus saying to the disciples, *'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.'* In other words, whoever welcomes the disciples as they go about doing the things which Christ has instructed them to do, welcomes Jesus Christ himself, and whoever welcomes Jesus Christ, welcomes the one who sent him, that is, God the Father. In this one little verse, we are given an even deeper reason for welcoming the stranger. It is not just that in welcoming the stranger we are welcoming Christ; we are also acknowledging something within the godhead itself: we welcome God the Father Himself who has sent God the Son.

Now, at this point, you may want to say to me, Paul, it is not that simple. Welcoming guests and strangers is often difficult and complicated. You can all probably tell me stories of those who came to you for help and when you did help them, it didn't work out. I understand the hesitation – I have experienced this myself. But I think the gospel reading itself speaks to this; the gospel reading itself, when read in context, attests to the complications.

Our gospel reading appears at the end of a long chapter which is all about the 12 disciples. We have been working through these gospel readings in lectionaries over the last few Sundays. The chapter starts when Jesus gives authority and power to the disciples, whatever is meant by those words. The disciples are to go into the villages. They are to look for somewhere to stay, someone who will welcome them, *'and if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.'* These words – and the verses which follow in the rest of chapter 10 - suggest that the presence of the disciples will not be without challenges for the villages to which they go. Their presence will probably be disruptive and will probably bring division.

And this is where our reading comes in. Today's gospel reading continues *'whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward ... and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the names of a disciple – truly, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'* That is, whoever welcome ones of the disciples in my name will receive the same reward as the disciples. Those who welcome the disciples, by listening to them and by giving hospitality to them will, in effect, be sharing in the work of the disciples. Those who welcome them are likely to share in the discord and division which the disciples have experienced. Whatever reward comes to those disciples, will also come to those who welcome them.

So yes, this is about welcoming people but, in its original sense, here in this gospel reading, it is about the welcome given to a specific group of people, the disciples who became the apostles. It is not about a welcome for everyone; it is about a welcome for the apostles in their apostolic ministry and that ministry is disruptive and unsettling, bringing changes with it. Welcoming the stranger is rarely an easy or simple matter. And, this is the challenging thing, when we welcome the stranger and the stranger brings change and disruption, this too may be an indication of the presence of Christ. Christ does not always come to soothe and to comfort.

I close with what I think is an instructive story about a church in Stoke on Trent called St. Mark's church. In 2013, refugees from the Middle East started coming to the church. Some of the refugees

had gone first to local mosques, but for whatever reason, had moved from the mosques to the church. The vicar, the Revd Sally Smith welcomed these refugees and supported them as much as she was able. Word got round and more and more refugees started coming to the church. Over time, many of these refugees stayed and became Christians. Such was their number that the church experienced significant changes, but the church increased greatly in numbers. Some of the original congregation struggled with the changes and disruption brought about by the church's welcome for these refugees. Some of the original congregation even left the church.

There is no simple, easy, happy ending to this sermon and I suspect to the story of that church. But I do know this. The call to welcome to the stranger, to clothe and to feed them, to give a cup of cold water, is presented as a command in the gospel because to do so is to welcome Christ. So let us continue to seek Christ in those who come to us, let us remember that Christ often comes in the guise of a stranger.

**Paul Regan**

**I acknowledge as a source and inspiration for this sermon Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way. A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995)**