



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 2th July 2023, 5th Sunday after Pentecost

Welcome by Jill Kayser

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” **Matthew 10:40-42**

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, enter into possession of the Kingdom which has been prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you gathered me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you came to visit me; in prison, and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and nourish you? Or thirsty, and gave you to drink? When did we see you a stranger, and gather you to us? Or naked, and clothed you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘This is the truth I tell you—insomuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ **Matthew 25: 35-40**

Welcome! Turn to your neighbour and say “welcome”. I bet you smiled as you said it, because welcome is a special kind of word that can’t really be said with a grumpy face. It’s a word that invites a smile. Try to say it without a smile, and you’ll find that you have to work quite hard at it.

We hear the word 'welcome' several times in today's gospel reading from Matthew; 6 times in 2 verses, to be exact. *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous..."*

There's no doubt that the concept of welcome is very important to the writer of Matthew. It's also key to the teachings of Jesus and essential to the life of his followers.

Jesus' followers probably were quite uncomfortable hearing him talk about this kind of welcome. In 1st century Judea, the idea of a human being an individual was foreign. Everyone was defined and identified by the groups they belonged to: family, tribe, religion, region, social status, profession.

Because people had such strong communal ties and were defined by them, they had very clear ideas about who was welcome, who belonged – and who didn't. Certain people were just not welcomed into a proper Jewish household, the temple or synagogues: non-Jews were synonymous with sinners.

And a pious Jew would never let themselves be welcomed into or enter the house of someone considered improper or uncouth. There was a line that just couldn't be crossed!

Even today 2000 years on, in a society and culture where individuality is highly valued, we may be more tribal than we think. Too often we too have quite fixed ideas about who is worthy of being in our midst, and who belongs. We have the expectation that all who enter our doors are to look the way we want them to look and to behave in the way we want them to behave. But that's most definitely not what Jesus was and is advocating when he talked about welcome. In his life he vehemently challenged this notion not only entering the houses of outsiders – like the house of Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector and collaborator of the Romans, but constantly reminding his followers: *whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

The operative word in here is 'whoever'. Whoever! It doesn't matter who it is. They don't have to be a member of your tribe or share your experience or opinion. It might be a stranger, it might be a sinner, it might be someone considered inappropriate. But in God's eyes, everyone is worthy.

In Matthew 25 we hear the words that so inspired the work of Mother Theresa and countless other saints and disciples. Jesus describes the final judgment, saying, *"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we*

saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, '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.'"

Jesus teaches that showing kindness, and providing hospitality, to strangers is the same as giving kindness and hospitality to Jesus himself. If we want to see Christ in the world, we only have to look at the faces of our neighbours. Jesus insists that we see Him, the Christ, in the faces of the people all around us – that's all people with no exceptions!

Are we able to see the face of Christ in a gang member, or a homeless person, or an emotionally disturbed man lying on our community centre lounge floor writhing in emotional pain while banging his head on the floor? Jesus is adamant we must constantly seek to recognise him in the least of these and strive to care for them as if we are caring for Him.

Mother Theresa said: *"I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper's wounds I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by: "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in."*

She and so many others like her, are true and wonderful examples of our human potential and capacity to respond to God's call on our lives to love, not to fear.

Now back to Mathew 10 for yet another challenging proposition. *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,"* says Jesus.

So not only do we find Christ in the world, but the world finds Christ in us. Let me say that again... **the world finds Christ in us!** What a daunting thought. What a momentous, challenging responsibility for us as followers of Jesus called to be the face and hands and feet of Jesus.

24 years ago when I first started working for this church as children, families and community ministries coordinator (for those of you who haven't know me that long, this is my second time round working for St Heliers Church and Community Centre), I remember feeling that as an employee of the Church I needed to be above reproach! I couldn't nip into the carpark that someone was also waiting to take or get grumpy with the shopkeeper or impatient with the bank teller. I needed to watch my guard. Silly of course because all of us who follow Jesus, not just those who work for the church, need to mind our p's and q's. We all need to be aware that every encounter we have with others has the potential to reflect the love and character of Jesus, or not.

Today more than at any time our world needs to know that there is God who loves us, is concerned for us, journeys with us, and offers us grace, hope, forgiveness, meaning and purpose in our lives. And we in turn, as the recipients of all these wonderful gifts of God, are called to share these gifts with others and offer God's hospitality and welcome to all.

Henri Nouwen, suggests that *“Hospitality is creating space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”*

I feel blessed to have a role working in our Church and Community Centre where every day I have so many opportunities to offer the kind of hospitality Nouwen alludes to - a space that welcomes the stranger with no agenda other than to love. But none of us need a slogan of “reaching out, welcoming in” to inspire us to do this, because it’s what we are called to do wherever we find ourselves.

And the good news is we don’t need qualifications or equipment or fancy words to be bearers of love and hope in the world. We like the disciples, sent out two by two, don’t need to take anything with us on the journey, we just need to be ourselves.

For two years I was a chaplain at St Andrew’s retirement village hospital and rest home. Sometimes it was monotonous and even disheartening work caring for so many demented people that didn’t seem to benefit from my attention or remember me from one day to the next.

I had a very special friend in the dementia ward called Bobbi. Shortly after Bobbi was admitted I discovered she used to play the ukulele, so I started taking in an extra ukulele with me when I went to sing with the patients. I would place the ukulele in Bobbi’s hands and despite her protests that she didn’t know how to play it, within minutes she was playing along with me. She would watch my fingers to see what cords I was playing and follow my lead. This meant she was quite often a bit behind the 8 ball, but nevertheless she would be grinning from ear to ear as she shouted out at me “you’re the gun!” which as you know after listening to my ukulele playing with the children this morning, I’m definitely not! This little act connected us and formed a special bond, so that whenever I visited her she would beam lovingly at me. I realised that while I couldn’t save Bobbi’s life or cure her, I could be the medicine she needed.

Our decision to live in the way of Christ is a path to wholeness and becoming fully human. We don’t ‘own’ God’s kingdom: we are merely stewards of God’s good news of grace and love and acceptance, with a duty and delight to welcome people to that.

This is how the kingdom of heaven has grown for over 2000 years and this is how it will continue to grow, like a mustard seed...

Jesus says, *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

Let’s re-commit our lives today and every day to let the world meet Jesus through us.

Amen.