

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost 28th June 2020

The Rev'd Colleen Clayton

Text;
Matthew 10:40-42

When I was a child and I asked Mum what something meant, she would instantly tell me to, "Go and look it up in the dictionary". This was often quite irritating; I wanted an instant answer and I didn't necessarily want to have to work for it! However, over time I came to love the dictionary and the treasures and unexpected connections it reveals.

One of the things that fascinates me is that it is often the simple words of everyday language that have the richest history or the greatest number of possible meanings. For example,

- Set 430
- Run 396
- Go 368
- Take 343
- Stand 334

Today, Jesus uses the word *welcome* six times in just three verses. I decided to look it up and found that it is a more complex word than I might have thought. The word *welcome*, can be;

- a noun, an instance or manner of greeting someone; "you will receive a warm welcome at St Matthew's"
- an exclamation, used to greet someone in a polite or friendly way; "Welcome to St Matthew's"
- a verb, to greet someone in a polite or friendly way; "St Matthew's welcomes guests"
- an adjective, of a guest gladly received; "We're pleased to see you at St Matthew's. You are welcome". Or,
- an adjective, meaning very pleasing because much needed or desired; "In a world that can be judgemental and cold, St Matthew's provides a welcome respite".

Jesus' words raise the importance of welcome.

Who do we receive? Who do we welcome? What does it mean to welcome?

When I was wondering about coming to St Matthew's I looked at the parish website. The first words I read there were, *Welcome to our Church!* I was very encouraged to see that this was at the very top of the website. Recently I changed the words that follow that initial greeting. It now says,

Welcome to our Church!

We welcome those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, old, young or somewhere in between. We welcome wailing babies, excited toddlers, lonely parents, children and teenagers.

We welcome those who work too hard, don't work or can't spell. Those who are sick, anxious and worried or need to talk about such problems or just be with others who are friendly and helpful.

We welcome those who could use a prayer right now and those who may have had religion forced down their throats as children and feel switched off but still in search of something or are just plain curious.

We welcome locals, doubters, pilgrims, seekers and YOU!

Last week I had a delightful, spontaneous visit from a person who had read those words and who had felt encouraged to make contact. These words of welcome were important to that person. Of course, as a friend of mine pointed out to me when I first made the change, if you say that Colleen, it had better be true when people come! And of course, he was right. Empty words of welcome are of no use to anyone. People know when a welcome is hollow or insincere. Each one of us has been welcomed by God with overwhelming joy and celebration in heaven. God doesn't wait until we are morally perfect, or until our theology is all sorted out, or until we can coherently explain why we should be loved, before God welcomes us. God just welcomes us with the love of a parent for a child. And God calls us to welcome others as fellow members of God's family.

The welcome that Jesus speaks of in this Gospel reading is offered *in the name of* prophets, righteous people, and little ones. In Semitic idiom, *in the name of*, means *because they are*. Therefore, our Gospel means that there is a reward for anyone who offers a welcome to prophets or righteous people or little ones simply because they are prophets, righteous people or little ones. This is a welcome of integrity because it is offered to someone precisely because they are who they are. Our welcome should be attentive to who the person is, where they come from, what they need. It is not just a form of polite words, it is a recognition that the person we greet is a child of God and therefore a brother or sister of ours. Is this the kind of welcome that we offer?

You might have noticed that I have made some changes to our liturgy this week. We began with the words, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. A priest friend of mine told me about attending an Education Department launch of a school resource on Islam. The Minister for Education greeted those gathered and then invited the Imam to say a few words. The Imam came to the podium and began by saying, *In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful*. This was a secular event, but the Islamic leader began by identifying the One in whose name he spoke. This inspired my friend to think about the way we begin our worship, to state at the very beginning that all we do is done in the name of the One we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To be attentive to the God who defines all our relationships by welcoming us into God’s family.

To welcome prophets and righteous people is to welcome those with gifts that we can identify and appreciate. Prophets speak uncomfortable truths and righteous people can shine a light on our own inadequacies, but usually, we can still identify them as people worthy of our welcome. People who are respectable and polite, who know how to behave in public and who probably attend church! But to welcome God’s little ones is a whole different story.

The little ones are those without power; those who society pushes to the margins; those who are invisible or who are seen with contempt. Their lives are not like ours. Again, and again in scripture we read that God’s preference is always for the little ones. This is where the call to welcome others simply because they are who they are, becomes far more challenging. It can be difficult to see God in those who are not like us, and yet our Gospel reading tells us that welcoming these people in the name of a disciple will be rewarded. In other words, welcome of the marginalised, the disenfranchised, the different, the challenging, is to be done because they are called to be disciples, just like us.

The failure to welcome little ones in the name of a disciple has been behind all kinds of social evils. Institutionalised prejudice and disadvantage can only exist while people with power refuse to welcome God’s little ones in their God-given identity. Racial, gender, sexual, ethnic, religious identity, all of these distinctions need to be recognised and respected. People are not all the same and thank God for that! Our identities are complex, fluid and important, but the identity that supersedes all others is that of a child of God, called to discipleship. God’s welcome is for us all and that is the welcome that we are called to offer; a welcome that offers to outsiders the dignity and respect due to a child of God.

This kind of welcome does not say *welcome to my place, my fellowship group, my church. This is how we do things here. This is what we expect of you if you want to belong.* God's welcome is far more radical and fundamental than that. God's welcome is embodied in Jesus who becomes fully human in order to welcome us into God's family. God's welcome involves a willingness to leave the place of power, to go out to meet others where they are, to be exposed, to become vulnerable, to risk rejection, just as Jesus did.

The current, global pandemic has dramatically changed all kinds of welcome. We no longer shake hands or hug each other; we cannot meet together as we have been used to doing. Under these circumstances, people are saying, *the church has left the building*, and that is good news. It is not God's nature to be contained by a building or by anything else. God sent Jesus to welcome us home. God's welcome cannot be held back.

Our YouTube channel has now had more than 1,300 views. Our community is visible in a new way, beyond the walls of this building. This has exciting possibilities for welcome, renewal and growth, but ultimately, what happens next may depend on whether or not our actions match the words on our website, on our ability to extend to others the welcome that we receive from God.

Welcome; a noun, an exclamation, a verb and an adjective.

Welcome to St Matthew's! You will receive a warm welcome here because we welcome you as a fellow disciple and your presence is truly welcome.

The Lord be with you.