

'Arms Wide Open' Sunday 28th June 2020 Pentecost 4A

Matthew 10:40-42

Our theme for today is, 'Arms Wide Open' and of the designated readings I have chosen to focus on the passage from Matthew, just three verses; should be easy....?

Matthew 10:40-42 New International Version - UK NIV

'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.'

The key concept in this passage as our theme suggests is 'welcome'.

What do you think of first? Hospitality maybe,

Does hospitality lies at the heart of Christian Discipleship.

My thoughts strayed to a story I read years ago in a Readers Digest. It was one of those *Drama in Real Life* stories, those heart-stopping survival situations that draw you into a true account of a dramatic life or death situation related by everyday people.

It went something like this. (Sorry, stripped of drama!)

A child was poised at a point of imminent danger. Something was about to explode threatening the life of the child. The parent not wanting to venture closer into the danger zone had to think quickly as to how best to turn the child's attention and have them retreat towards safety. They could have simply called the child's name, but, the risk was that the child might run away rather than run towards safety. The parent crouched down with open arms wide open in a welcoming invitation. Without hesitation the child responded, turned around and ran towards this loving embrace, away from danger. The gesture was so potent and the response seemingly instinctive. A happy ending!

I guess we can all think of personal examples of arms wide open in welcome;- a welcome home, being greeted by a loved family member or your dog! We imagine a scene of, embracing, belonging, feeling loved, safe, secure, reunited. At this one-to-one level there is acceptance, not defined by appearance or age or gender or intelligence or by past wrongs....simply belonging with those who belong to you.

(Our children, no doubt can construct a picture of what welcome at home feels and looks like. They might like to attempt the task below. There are communities within communities, churches, schools, workplaces, aged care facilities. What does welcome look like in these settings? How does the physical environment, the furniture, the building demonstrate welcome? How do we show welcome by our behaviour?

The extra challenge for the kids and for us is to think about what welcome might look like in this CoVid situation where physical embracing is reserved to close family and we can't gather and visit like normal?)

Beyond the personal you may think of a community, even a church community, that figuratively has 'arms wide open', is open-hearted, inclusive, welcoming the neighbour, the friend, the stranger, the foreigner, the outsider, the homeless or the least fortunate. More broadly, welcoming new ideas, open to difference to change? Connected and cohesive this again would be a positive image of welcome, finding a **place within a Place**.

On a larger grander scale than community, we might try to imagine a nation, a whole society that is welcoming; tolerant, multicultural with rights and freedoms, perhaps not overly defensive, nationalistic, proud or insular, but having concern for all citizens including the poor and destitute, the isolated, the asylum seeker, the refugees, the foreigner within their borders. **A world within the world**.

Of course we could extrapolate to a whole world that is welcoming. But before I/we get carried away, let us try and focus ourselves on general Biblical images or examples.

As Christians our thoughts may veer towards familiar Biblical images - 'Arms wide open'; perhaps the most archetypal image is the one Jesus paints in our minds, the parable of the prodigal son. Here we picture the father welcoming the prodigal son home with enthusiastic welcome. He is running towards him with arms wide open. All of those positive features we may have previously identified are here: - the wayward son is accepted, forgiven, returning and greeted by his Dad, embraced, loved, safe, secure, reunited, belonging. All of the above; - here is a beautiful personal image of welcome and acceptance.

At a community level, I think of the early church, you may think of other examples - save them for discussion later!

Acts 4:32-35 Contemporary English Version (CEV)

'The group of followers all felt the same way about everything. None of them claimed that their possessions were their own, and they shared everything they had with each other. In a powerful way the apostles told everyone that the Lord Jesus was now alive. God greatly blessed his followers and no one went in need of anything. Everyone who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles. Then they would give the money to anyone who needed it.'

Here are our predecessors, sharing resources, living in a community of care, especially for the most vulnerable, widows and orphans, the sick and the lonely. They are drawing people from beyond the natural family together into real communities of love and compassion. Sounds beautiful!

And finally nationally, Jesus' coming to earth to reveal the ways of God in person was, as we all know, in the context of a dispossessed people living in subjugation to the mighty Roman Empire but also domestically dominated and even oppressed by their own religious leaders. Some saw Jesus as the promised messiah, some as a prophet, and some as simply an upstart carpenter from Galilee. Yet, his teachings had appeal and drew attention, and by some, acceptance. Firstly, he came to the Jews and in particular those on the margins of that society; the sick, the lost, the rejected; the sinners, this new audience of God-believers felt included, welcomed and, most importantly, accepted by Jesus and by God the Father. Followers dedicated their lives to him, committed in discipline and striving for understanding and obedience to his teachings.

All this sounds very positive - this being welcome! Is this a complete picture of the Good News of Jesus?

Let us look again at our text for today, Matthew 10:40-42. Jesus is speaking to his disciples who have been just sent out to share, preach and teach the gospel – the good news!

It would be wrong to suggest that the words of Jesus recorded here are solely about hospitality and reward for welcome.

Other translations substitute 'welcome' for 'receive'.

40 *"He who receives (Greek: dechomenos—receives) you receive me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.*

41 *He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. He who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.*

42 *Whoever gives one of these little ones just a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple, most certainly I tell you he will in no way lose his reward."*

Matthew 10:40-42 New Living Translation

I don't want to lose track of the concept of reward which is ultimately the positive implication of the passage, but I think it is fair to look at the less desirable consequences of **receiving**, Jesus Christ or prophets or the righteous, or His disciples, to look beyond basic hospitality.

Remember the Hymn we sing, The Summons,

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? And further down,

*Will you risk the hostile stare,
should your life attract or scare?*

*Will you let me answer prayer in you
and you in me?*

By contrast, let us repeat the same exercise of thinking of a Biblical image of 'Arms wide open', but images in our minds perhaps not so desirable. The paramount image is of the suffering Christ upon the cross, His arms outstretched. We consider Him at a very personal level still a mother's child,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJFukHNdowA>

He Was Still Her Little Child - Roxanne Paul
note the last verse,

**And when they nailed Him
To a wooden cross then we were reconciled
When she held His broken body
He was still her little child
He was still her little child**

Here is, for all time, Christ, the sacrifice for the sins of the world. The 'Good Friday' image, if I can call it that, is one that is the epitome of pain and grief. Such a situation no one would ever desire, yet sadly, so sadly, and tragically one with which some, even in the human experience could identify then as now. Ironically, this is still, most uniquely, the ultimate invitation to belonging. The Easter story, from the abandonment of hell to resurrected life, where all tears are wiped away, an intimate description of comfort,

Revelation 21: v4 *He will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. These things of the past are gone forever.* CEV

Neither do we have to have to think for long to be reminded of biblical **prophets** who suffered. I think of John the Baptist whose faithful acknowledgement of the Christ led to his murder. I'm sure you can think of many others whose reward was not in their present but deferred to a resurrected glory.

Likewise, the faithful, **righteous disciples** who after Christ's death, resurrection and return to the Father, suffered persecution and death and have done throughout history to the present day, reserve their ultimate hope and reward to beyond the grave.

So 'receiving' Jesus as Christ the Lord can mean many things, 'The Greek word used in the passage is 'dechomenos', to expand on its meaning, :-

to take with the hand,

to take hold of, take up

to receive or grant access to, a visitor, not to refuse conversation or friendship

to offer hospitality'

In the context of family:-,

'to receive into one's family to bring up or educate'.

In the context of something offered in speaking or teaching, or instructing:-,

it means to receive favourably, give ear to, embrace, to make one's own, approve, not to reject.

Personally, and Biblically, it can mean:-

to take upon one's self, sustain, bear, endure to get, to learn for oneself.

There are lots of different aspects of meaning here, we could choose any one and explore further, but in the context of today's passage we consider that, following on from the end of Matthew chapter 9, (last week's reading) Jesus looks at the crowds and has compassion on them. They are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). So he tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (9:37-38).

Jesus evidently **intends his disciples to be the answer to their own prayer**, for at the beginning of chapter 10, he is sending them out, giving them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (10:1).

A few chapters further on in Matthew's account, Jesus says to his disciples:

If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me.

Matthew 16:24-26 Contemporary English Version (CEV)

To take up one's cross is 'a hard sell', as they say, and I want to end on a positive note! As I said earlier, our text is about welcoming, and reward, and good news!

Yet, we each live in our own drama in real life.....you know your own drama well! We live with danger, Covid 19, unemployment, sickness, grief, confusion, loss of many kinds. The Word says, **God the Father is here, present, arms wide open**, so may our response be

instinctive, spontaneous. Beyond the simple hearing of our name may we do a U-turn, may we run towards God the Father, like the child at risk, to safety; the wayward son or daughter to a secure and righteous lifestyle! In life as in death, we belong, personally and communally in a great circle of belonging. We are 'all in this together' in more ways than one.

Matthew 10: Verse 40

'Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent m'

'Arms Wide Open', those three verses; should be easy? Well, maybe not so easy, food for thought, an invitation to commitment and belonging with the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. May we each experience a true sense of God's embrace.

Amen