

Matthew 10: 40 - 42 sermon Year A Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”. These words are among the final ones in the long list of instructions Jesus has given his disciples before sending them out to preach the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. You may remember those instructions from the sermon I preached the other week. And as I was preparing for this sermon, I began to think about welcomes and hospitality.

I have to confess, I'm not very good at hospitality in the more traditional sense. In the sense of welcoming someone into your home and providing good food and a congenial, inviting environment. Yet hospitality is an important aspect of life. Relationships and communities are formed when people sit down and spend time together, share a meal. You know that from your own lives. Our community shares in God's hospitality at the Eucharist.

In ancient Israel, hospitality was paramount. Not only due to its history as a nomadic people in a harsh environment, but also as a demonstration of faithfulness to God. It was a religious and social obligation. Travellers would wait at the city gate for an offer of hospitality and the minimum provision was to be bread and water.

Hospitality from others was vital to Jesus' mission. We know that women travelled with Jesus and the disciples, providing for them out of their own resources. And they also relied on the hospitality of strangers, as earlier in chapter 10 Jesus had commanded them, “take no gold, or silver, no bag for your journey...for labourers deserve their food”. This is how embedded hospitality was in the culture. But more than cultural and social obligations were at stake. Matthew's gospel also tells us that the giving or refusing of hospitality to Jesus' followers was regarded as an indication of either acceptance or rejection of the gospel and therefore of Jesus himself, and by extension, God himself. Jesus is was effect saying, “How you treat the other is how you treat me.”

And I'm pleased to say that St Georges' does a good job in caring for the other in terms of providing for the St Albans and St Mark's food pantries, and the Brigidine Asylum seeker project. Hospitality, caring for the other, is to be an integral part of how people live out their faith. I was reminded of this in a recent article by Giles Fraser for “The Guardian” newspaper. This month's TMA has also mentioned this.

The article was written in the aftermath of the terrible Grenfell fire tragedy in London. It is about the church of St Clement's, Notting Dale situated in the shadow of Grenfell tower. The vicar is Reverend

Alan Everett who leads as he described it, “an unsuccessful church” - meaning it only gets 30 to 60 people in the pews on a Sunday morning. Reverend Alan says that on the night of the fire, “I was woken up at 3am by a priest who lives in the tower, and so I came down to the church, opened the doors and turned the lights on.” It all began from there. By 7am, the church had a fully stocked breakfast bar, with volunteers organising themselves into teams. The church assisted all who came through the door, and there were many.

As you are aware, Christians were not the only ones to provide hospitality. People of other faiths and no faith came together to offer help to those in need. Mosques and community centres opened their doors and the donations piled in.

However, this parish was already trusted and relied upon in its local community because of its charity offshoot, the Clement James centre, which helps thousands of local people every year. Speaking of the people they serve, an exhausted Reverend Alan said, “We are called to share in the brokenness and the forgottenness of the people we serve.” And Giles writes, “The job is to keep the doors open and the lights on. And this being permanently present is no small thing”.

Being permanently present to whoever comes through the door in hospitality, in acceptance, in love. This is no small thing, because it is a hard thing. Because hospitality in the Christian sense is so much more than just inviting someone over for good conversation and a good meal.

Henri Nouwen said this about hospitality - “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free 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.”

Honest reaching out means inviting the stranger into our world and on his or her terms, not on ours. When we say, ‘you can be my guest if you believe what I believe, think the way I think and behave as I do,’ we offer hospitality and love under a condition or for a price. And people recognise this. People feel pressured, they feel manipulated. There is an inauthenticity that people detect and it repels them. Furthermore, this is not the way that God comes to us in the person of Jesus. He doesn’t offer love under a set of conditions of how to think or behave before he welcomes people, before he welcomes us. The book of Romans tells us, “This is how God demonstrates his own love for us: the Messiah died for us while we were still sinners”. He doesn’t hold back his generosity or love waiting for us to fall into line. Thank God.

Hospitality can be a hard thing. Not only because it means letting people just be and letting God do his transforming work in his own time, and as you know, God can have frustratingly slow timetables. But because today's verses also talk about welcoming prophets. Which at first glance, may seem exciting.

I think you agree that prophets have built up quite a reputation: an aura of mystic. They can seem quite dazzling: from afar. But let them through the door and prophets are usually disruptive, unsettling. They are not like those psychics featured in women's magazines foretelling true love and monetary windfalls.

It is said that prophets are sent by God to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Think of biblical prophets such as Amos. Prophets who said things like, "you have settled down into a comfortable complacency and lost your love for God, your compassion for those in need. You pay lip service to your faith and go through the rituals, but your hearts are far from God".

And the harshest criticisms, as we see in the words of John the Baptist and of Jesus, are reserved for the religious elite, the clergy of their day. Would we really welcome a prophet if they walked through our door? Would we welcome them on their own terms? Would we welcome what they had to say? What would they have to say?

Hospitality is no small thing. It means opening ourselves up to all sorts of encounters: many affirming, some uncomfortable. It involves patience and acceptance and love. Yet we are called to be hospitable and welcome all. We are called to open the doors and turn the lights on because, as Christians believe, the light will always beckon people out of the darkness.