

Lectionary Readings for 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; St Matthew 10:40-42.

The Good News Translation of the Gospel reading says - "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me".

We'll keep a welcome, and not just in the hillside.

Welcome. It's such a common word. It adorns floor mats outside all sorts of front doors. It's often on road signs as one enters a town. But sometimes only if you are a careful driver.

In more normal times, there are welcome signs when you enter Museums, or Forest Parks. Welcome signs at Airports. Or a restaurant - "Good evening and welcome - table for two?" Hopefully the rather stark signs saying "Closed" will soon return to "Welcome".

While we use the word casually and commercially, making one welcome is not as simple as offering a word, though it often starts there. The art of making one welcome is rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality.

Preparing to welcome someone takes thought, intention, discipline. Some practitioners of hospitality are masters of the art; they're always ready with the accoutrements of welcome: an appropriate beverage, food, a comfortable chair, a few thoughtful and respectful questions of the "comer."

Their very presence seems to wipe away the strangeness or awkwardness of social greeting and make one feel as if they are home.

Perhaps the measure of true welcome is the ability of the host to make the guest feel at home. There are some places where one can go and always feel at home. It may look different. It may smell different. It may be full of strangers. But, somehow, it just feels like home, and it is good to be there.

I can well remember my early days in Bangladesh – I could speak none of the language – but being a bachelor at the time, and living in an area where very few people could speak English – I could have experienced what might be described as "loneliness in a crowd" – but the Bangladeshis are master craftsmen at the art of welcome, despite language barriers. Everyone in the groups I have taken to Bangladesh over the last 20 years have all spoken of the wonderful welcome which they always received.

For Jews and Christians, such hospitality has always been a part of who we are. The call to welcome the stranger is anchored in the Old Testament and was a part of the measure of the Hebrew community's faithfulness to God. When a traveller came to town, they waited by the well, and it was incumbent upon the townspeople to house and feed the visitor for the night.

Of course, these travellers were rarely family. These were folks unknown to the community. They were aliens, often foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, different gods. Opening one's home was risky.

Sadly in more recent times, many seem to have come to fear the strangers among us, because they look different. You are different, you are not welcome. Go home.

Paul reminded the Romans to offer hospitality to the alien, and in the Letter to the Hebrews the people were reminded to show hospitality to all for in so doing some entertained angels unaware. In Acts, the early deacons practiced hospitality throughout the community, bringing welcome to those in need. And in Matthew's community, hospitality still measured the faithfulness of the people.

In his book "New Testament Words" Willie Barclay reminds us that in the Greek, the word for stranger – xenos - is also the word for guest and host. In this age of contemporary tribal warfare, of communities who are wary of others around them, most of us are all too aware of the term "xenophobia," or fear of the stranger. Such a fear leads to the wrong kind of nationalism, racism and even genocide. As many scholars have noted, however, Jesus' call to welcome another is a call to xenophilia, or love of stranger, the stranger who is also guest, who as the embodiment of Christ after a long walk on the Emmaus road - is also host.

Hospitality should be the central practice of the Christian church today and how we are missing this by being forced apart.

To offer hospitality, we simply bring who we are, what we have, where we are. At times that may be grand; at times that may be very little. Some of the most moving times I have ever had in my life were sitting in a one roomed tin roofed home in a village in Bangladesh and been served a biscuit, a banana and a cup of tea by people who by our standards would be well below the poverty line.

In every case, it is the gesture itself - the practice - that shapes the character of the encounter that shapes the character of the participants, of the story of grace that is the essence of the moment.

Welcoming another requires paying attention to the other. It means often setting aside our discomfort for how one may be different or strange to us and meeting her or him as they are. Being an agent of God's hospitality makes Christ's presence known, for as Matthew reminds us, when two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is present there as well.

May God continue to open our eyes, our ears, our hands, our hearts - and, indeed, our very lives - to the strangers among us, so that we might welcome all in the name of Jesus Christ and let us pray that that day will come again when we are practising our welcome in the welcoming space of our sanctuaries.