**28th June 2020**

Call to worship

The steadfast love of the Lord is established for ever.
His faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
The Lord invites us and welcomes us.
Let us worship the Lord.



HYMN: The Love of God comes close

A gathering prayer

Loving God, we gather in response to your invitation;
we gather together, welcomed by you.
May the warmth of your welcome
inspire and enhance the worship we offer to you.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.



A prayer of approach

O God, your Spirit draws us into your presence,
and so we come – drawn by love, upheld by grace –
to encounter Jesus, our Saviour.
We know him as our master.
We know him as our friend.
In him we see the Father, whose love sent Jesus to us.
Spirit, Son and Father,
we draw close in faith to offer our praise and worship.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

We are sorry, dear Lord, for the times we judge others and find them wanting.
We are sorry that we turn away from your children in their need.
We are sorry that we think we are too busy.
We are sorry for the times our welcome has been lukewarm.
Forgive us, and help us to remember the warmth of your welcome, and to be inspired to share that warmth with all people.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration

You, O Lord, are the glory and the strength!
Happy are those who know the festal shout:
who walk in the light of your countenance.
Your love is secure and unending.
Happy are those who know the festal shout:
who walk in the light of your countenance.
Your righteousness and mercy are without measure.
Happy are those who know the festal shout:
who walk in the light of your countenance.
Accept our praise and adoration, Lord, we pray.
Amen.

Lord’s Prayer

**Matthew 10. 40 -42**

The football has returned. In case you hadn’t notice. And this week Liverpool were crowned Premier League Champions for the first time in 30 years. Much has been made of how patient and frustrated their supporters have been that they haven’t won the title for 30 years. As a Burnley supporter, whose team won the title for the last time, and probably THE LAST TIME exactly 60 years ago, it’s hard to sympathize with the impatience and frustration of Liverpool supporters. But nevertheless, well done to them – they have played well and deserve the title and still have some records to beat.

What has been amusing about the return of football is seeing how the footballers greet one another before and after the match and when celebrating a goal. In these socially distanced days, some have celebrated in splendid isolation in their own circles. Sometimes players just forget about all that and hug and slap each other on the back. Sometimes they fist bump, other times they exchange elbow shakes. Its very amusing.

All around the world people have greeted each other in different ways.

* Tibetan monks stick their tongues out to greet people.
* In Japan people bow.
* In Oman, men greet each other by pressing their noses together.
* The traditional Maori greeting in New Zealand is to press foreheads together and look into each other’s eyes.
* In Malaysia you would stretch out your hand and touch the other person’s fingertips, and then bring your hands to your heart as a sign that your greeting is heartfelt.
* In Kenya you will be in for a treat when tribal warriors perform a magnificent jumping dance!

The verb ‘to welcome’ means ‘*to be pleased about and encourage or support something or someone’*.

But the restrictions of the coronavirus have thrown all that up in the air and we have had to find new ways of greeting others and showing welcome.

It’s been a great loss for many not to have that personal meeting, not to share a handshake, a hug, a kiss. At sad times, like when people have been suffering, or bereaved, those physical gestures can convey what words cannot - a sense of solidarity and empathy and understanding. It’s been difficult.

God calls us to be a welcoming community offering others a sense of belonging and hope.

In our Bible reading today from Matthew 10.43-45,[[1]](#endnote-1) this short excerpt, which closes the block of Jesus’ teaching on mission in Matthew’s Gospel, mirrors the beginning of last week’s Gospel reading (10.24-39). That passage began (10.24-25) by discussing how those who reject Jesus will act the same way towards his followers. This week’s verses discuss how those who respond positively to the disciples will be understood to have welcomed Jesus. Moreover, in a line that demonstrates a high view of Christ, those who welcome Jesus are understood to be welcoming the one who sent him; that is, God the Father. Jesus is God’s mediator.

If the welcome is made on the basis that the one received is a prophet or a righteous person, then the host might expect a reward; it is not clear if that is the reward due to a prophet/righteous person themselves, or that which a prophet might give to those who receive them (as seen in some Old Testament stories – e.g. 1 Kings 17.8-24; 2 Kings 4.8-37). Either way, it is a promise of reward and this is probably intended in the sense of a consequence at the end of the age.

The passage highlights again the importance, in that culture, of offering hospitality. The reference to giving water, which was the basic requirement of hospitality then as now (and for which no reward would be expected), is echoed in Matthew 25.35-40, speaking of the time ‘when the Son of Man comes in his glory’. Jesus welcomes and rewards those who, in giving a drink to one of his ‘brothers’, are viewed as having ministered to Jesus himself.

I spoke the other week of my time in Ghana West Africa. Being in the tropics it was hot and humid most days. We have had a taste of hot weather this week. All you want to do is drink. When you arrived at some one’s house in Ghana there was a formal way of being greeted. You would obviously say hello and do an elaborate handshake. You were asked about any news of the road and relatives. Then you were given a drink of water. That was the least that was expected from you as host.

*Ann Conway-Jones asks [[2]](#endnote-2)*How many things can you do with a cup of water?

You could, of course, drink it. Or rinse your fingers. Or water a plant, make a cup of tea, cook some rice, wash a patch of floor… In hot weather, you could go outside and have a socially distanced water fight!

In this week’s little passage from Matthew’s Gospel (10.40-42), a cup of water becomes a symbol of hospitality – a cup of cold water for a hot, tired, and dusty traveller.

To be hospitable, to be welcoming, is to provide another person with the basics of food and shelter. But it’s far more than that. For hospitality is no impersonal exercise. A simple glass of water is an embodied way of saying to another human being that they matter, that we are glad to see them, that we enjoy their company. To be welcoming is not simply a matter of handing over material goods. When we open the doors of our homes, we open our hearts. We show someone that they are of value by being prepared to share something of ourselves. We make ourselves vulnerable, thereby creating relationships. And here in Matthew’s Gospel we are told that in welcoming other human beings we are welcoming God.

The opposite of a welcoming atmosphere is a hostile environment. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the discrimination that black people have felt and the lack of equality in our society. The policy of creating a hostile environment for illegal immigrants proved disastrous for our society, leading, among other things, to the Windrush scandal. It created fear, encouraged suspicion, perpetuated divisions, and demonized vulnerable human beings. All in the hope that people would voluntarily leave this country. It cultivated not welcome but rejection. And by shutting ourselves off from other human beings, we risk shutting ourselves off from God.

In this time of Coronavirus, hospitality, like just about everything else, can’t quite be what it was. We haven’t been able to invite people into our homes or into our churches. We can’t give them a hug. But that needn’t mean that we can’t be welcoming – the challenge is to find inventive ways of telling people that they matter, of sharing the basics of life, giving reassurance and comfort, and opening our hearts. Something as simple as a picture in the window, to make people smile as they pass by. For in each welcoming gesture, we welcome God.

Some in our church have been active in supporting others in our church during this lockdown, which has created strong bonds of appreciation and togetherness. As a church we have been active in the scheme for street volunteers in the town offering to do shopping and collect prescriptions for people who don’t want to go out. We have run a great scheme delivering veg and fruit boxes and essentials to people, especially those who are experiencing financial challenges because of the pandemic. Every week one of our members goes off to the M&S food hall to pick up food that is just about to go out of date to distribute it free to those in our community who would appreciate it. We have also been able to support people through our Covid 19 fund to which people have made financial donations to help others. I have also been able to issue vouchers for foodbank parcels which have helped many people. We are hoping to partner with other churches in this town to offer a pop-up café for school children during the summer holidays – where we can offer simple nutritious food and some creative activities. We will be asking for volunteers and for donations of food and money to help put this on in due course. We don’t want any praise for any of this, nor publicity – but I want you to know that as a church we’ve tried to tell people they matter, we have tried to share the basics of life and give reassurance and comfort.

What we have found is that those gestures have often been reciprocated. You give and you receive.

Many have said they won’t forget the kindness they have received and that it has prompted them to offer kindness to others and openness to faith in God.

In today’s world, we tend to be rather security conscious. In the past, your doors might have been unlocked all the time. Now, our homes increasingly are identified as places of privacy and retreat. Social interactions often happen elsewhere, on neutral ground – perhaps in a café, a restaurant, a bar, in the park. Easing of restrictions are going to make that possible again. We are working out how to get the church reopened but there are lots of things to think about and if and when that happens it won’t quite be the same as it was – yet hopefully there will still be a delight in seeing others and offering some kind of welcome.

Jesus stresses the importance of ‘going out’, of interacting with others. He refers to ‘whoever welcomes you’ – and that leaves room for those who don’t! In what sense do we ‘go in the name of Jesus’? Is Jesus reflected in us, in our words and actions, or do we need specifically to say who we are?

A country’s new ambassador, meeting the Queen for the first time, will always offer her their ‘credentials’ – assuring her that she can trust them to speak on behalf of those who sent them. What credentials can we offer to show that we are sent by Jesus?

In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear a summing up of the instructions and advice Jesus gives as he sends the disciples out.[[3]](#endnote-3) Whoever welcomes the disciples (and us), welcomes him. A disciple’s character, actions and words are to be such that they (and we) can be identified as belonging to Jesus. When followers of Jesus are welcomed, it is as if Jesus himself is welcomed, and his Father who sent him too. While a welcome into a home had a far stronger cultural basis than we may experience today, nonetheless our interactions with others, in any medium or location, should in some way bring Jesus into the encounter.

When we are welcomed because of our faith in Jesus, the one who welcomes us will receive a reward such as ours says Jesus. If our reward is eternal life with God, then this suggests that those who acknowledge that God’s authority is delegated to us also have faith sufficient for their salvation. The responsibility rests on us to elicit such a response from those we meet.

With echoes of the questions posed in Matthew 25, amounting to: ‘When did I see you in need and help you?’, we should bear in mind the effect our care has on others. The culture of a Middle Eastern welcome includes, then and now, a duty of care, a responsibility to meet the guest’s needs, albeit with an understanding of not outstaying one’s welcome. We also need to be reminded that sometimes we are to be a blessing to others by allowing them to care for us, by being gracious in receiving hospitality and kindness from others, as well as offering them.

Jesus ‘sent out’ the disciples. This week’s Gospel reading is about what happens when they arrive!

May our arrival be an opportunity for grace and blessing.

Prayers of intercession

Lord hear our prayer

Lord Jesus,
we pray in your name and in the name of peace
for the worn torn countries of the world,
for countries where violence is rife,
for communities where tensions run high.
Lord, hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of sorrow
for the people of Reading,
as we remember James Furlong, Joe Ritchie-Bennett and David Wails,
for those who tried to save them,
for those who grieve for them.
Lord hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of justice
for the marginalised people of the world,
for those who are discriminated against,
for those who are trafficked.
Lord hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of compassion
for the animals of the world,
for those that are hunted,
those that are exploited,
those that are endangered.
Lord hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of gratitude
for those who stand up for the oppressed,
for those who kneel down for the victimised,
for those who speak out for the silenced.
Lord hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of love
for children and young people.
for those who are vulnerable,
for those with special needs,
for those who are carers for their parents and siblings.
Lord hear our prayer

We pray in your name and in the name of hope
for economic challenges to be overcome,
for opportunities to be embraced,
for changes to be long lasting.
Lord hear our prayer

Lord Jesus, we pray in your name and in the name of faith
for your church throughout the world,
for those entrusted with leadership,
for congregations reaching out to their communities,
for one another to live as we pray.
Lord hear our prayer

Lord Jesus, we pray in your name and in the name of thankfulness
for businesses and venues preparing to open again,
for families preparing to meet up again,
for friends preparing to socialise again;
and we pray for all in government as they continue to monitor and measure
the levels of infections around the UK.
Lord hear our prayer,
for you are our strength and our inspiration
and in you we trust.
Amen.

May they know the welcome of your love

We pray for those on the fringes of society;
for those who feel rejected;
for those who are overlooked;
for those whom others avoid.
May they know they are welcome in your kingdom.
May they know the welcome of your love.

We pray for those who are lonely.
May they know they are welcome in your kingdom.
May they know the welcome of your love.

We pray for those in prison; especially those kept in isolation.
May they know they are welcome in your kingdom.
May they know the welcome of your love.

We pray for children excluded from school; for their families and those with responsibility for their education.
May they know they are welcome in your kingdom.
May they know the welcome of your love.

Loving God, as you welcome us, may we welcome others with warmth and steadfast love.
Amen.



HYMN: Let us build a house where love can dwell

A sending out prayer

Go in the name of Jesus,
to follow the way of Jesus,
to love with the love of Jesus,
and to be sustained by the peace of Jesus.
Amen.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-8/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-8/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-8/explore-respond> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)