

Matthew 10. 40 -42

Sermon

This week started with a warm welcome to a new MP in Westminster. Over 200 Labour MPs gathered to welcome Andy Burnham as the heir apparent. Only an hour earlier the Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer had announced his resignation, sensing he had overstayed his welcome. So the turnover of leaders of the country continues. We used to laugh at how the Italians went through Prime Ministers. I'm sure the Italians are laughing at us.

Paul Woolley from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity writes:

What should concern us is the broader trend. We live in an age of accelerating change, increasing complexity, and relentless pressure for immediate results. Politicians, media organisations, and the public alike are often drawn towards the urgent at the expense of the important. Yet many of the challenges facing modern societies – economic stagnation, rising debt, pressures on social care, technological disruption, the ecological crisis – cannot be solved within the timescale of a news cycle or even a parliamentary term.

Complex times require leaders who remain in office long enough to think and act for the long term.

The Scriptures recognise the value of perseverance. Human flourishing depends on qualities that develop slowly: patience, wisdom, trustworthiness, and faithfulness. As the apostle Paul writes, 'suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope' (Romans 5:3–4).

That insight may be particularly important today. The late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks often spoke of the need for a 'politics of hope' – a politics capable of looking beyond immediate frustrations towards a better future.

In the Macclesfield by-election, hope was a central theme in Andy Burnham's campaign. Yet hope is sustained not merely by promises of change, but by the patient work of delivering it. It requires leaders who stay the course, build trust over time, and undertake the slow work of renewal.

Perhaps that is the deeper lesson of Britain's revolving-door politics. A culture fixated on the short term will struggle to address long-term problems. If we want a more hopeful future we need to recover the lost art of perseverance – not only in our leaders, but in ourselves.

For anyone who follows football, [the welcome received by teams and their supporters at the World Cup matches](#) has filled the news and been a delight. The Iranian football team, barred from practice in the USA, received a warm welcome in Mexico, and were [most appreciative of the way they were received](#).

The fact that some individuals and teams were not welcomed has provoked outrage, and support for those who were not welcomed properly. Somali referee Omar Artan, who was denied entry to the United States to officiate at the World Cup, [will still receive his full tournament fee](#). FIFA officials clearly thought welcoming everyone who loved football was far more important than Trump's political posturing.

We might almost add an additional verse to Jesus' welcomes: Whoever welcomes a lover of football in the name of football will receive the reward of unity within The Beautiful Game's communities and beyond.

Today's short Gospel reading comes at the end of Jesus' instructions for mission, which he gave to his disciples. Jesus says that, if they are welcomed, it is the equivalent of welcoming God. The same is true for us. When we welcome others into our midst we are welcoming God, whose image we can see in everyone we meet. It doesn't have to be an elaborate welcome. Something as simple as providing someone with basic needs (a cup of cold water) is a demonstration of love and respect. 'These little ones' that Jesus mentions doesn't just mean the children, but the marginalised, the elderly, or those from minority groups – anyone, in fact, whom Roman or Jewish society did not rate highly.

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*'.

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,ⁱ 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.

Have you ever spotted a famous person? Did you go up and ask them for a selfie or an autograph, or were you too shy? Or perhaps you were unsure if it was them?

Some celebrities perhaps revel in people asking for selfies and autographs when they are out and about, whereas others probably wish they could hide or wear a mask, particularly if they are on holiday with their families. Being recognised is not always a comfortable situation. The same can be true for teachers if they meet one of their pupils while out shopping. Who feels more embarrassed, the student or the teacher? Might these interactions go more smoothly if we recognise the other person as human, like us, people in need of welcome, gentleness, privacy or respect.

The opposite of a welcoming atmosphere is a hostile environment. 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 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.

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?

Even just remembering someone's name can bring them respect when otherwise they might go unnoticed. It is very frustrating to be called by the wrong name or have your name used informally in a formal situation, because our name is part of our identity and the essence of who we are. In the early days of her career, the tennis star Martina Navratilova got very frustrated with a Wimbledon umpire who couldn't pronounce her name. At one change of ends she was heard to say: 'Can't you get my name right?'

We can show respect to people simply by calling them by their preferred name in any particular situation.

So, our daily challenge is to recognise and acknowledge those around us who are being overlooked by others. Is there someone sleeping rough by the railway station entrance, or a person at work who never speaks to anyone? What 'cup of cold water' can we provide, or listening ear, or sandwich? Perhaps we can offer a friendly smile and invitation to join the party, or ask someone their name and then use it regularly when we pass them in the street? Whatever we do, we can be sure that these small acts of faithfulness will not be unrecognised by God.

But Jesus's words don't just refer to our recognition of others. Part of being human is allowing others to minister to us on occasions. Allowing others to serve us can be just as gracious an act as serving someone else. This is another way of showing them respect: accepting their help.

Whether we are giving or receiving, Jesus tells us: 'you will receive a reward' – the reward of being known and loved intimately by God, no matter what. What greater reward could there be?

ⁱ <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-8/bible-notes>