

Matthew 10: 40-end

Welcome in the Name of Christ

By way of an apology I should tell you that the lectionary specifies Romans 6:12-end as the NT counterpart to this Gospel reading, but I have chosen instead a passage from 1 Kings 17: 8-24, 'The Widow of Zarephath.' The theme for today's talk is 'Welcome in the Name of Christ'. Hospitality and welcome are themes that run throughout the bible; the welcome of God into our lives and by extension, the welcome of those who come to us bringing their needs, aspirations and cries for help and shouts of joy.

Hospitality is a gift. Some people are naturally hospitable. Their homes and lives are open for others to share; but for others, hospitality is an effort and performed through a sense of duty. For committed introverts, offering hospitality is tantamount to the invasion of personal space. Thankfully, we are all different and have different gifts.

We cannot define hospitality purely on the grounds of having people round for a meal. Generally, when we do this we welcome the people who we 'like' and who are compatible with ourselves. In the Gospels, hospitality is the act of invitation to people who are not like ourselves; it is an act of radical inclusion and self-giving. It is unfortunate that the catering sector has come to be known as 'the hospitality industry', (as if to imply that hospitality can be commodified), for while 'the industry' is all about the provision of decent food and shelter, there is invariably a fast buck involved and

the deeper reception of the person is not on the tick sheet. Real acts of hospitality are not so concerned with the quality of the toiletries in the bathroom.

(If any of you have been on a budget trip to Taizé, you will know that the thrill of cold showers and hard-as-iron bunk beds do not affect the quality of the hospitality).

True hospitality is more of a disposition; an openness of the heart towards the other, a welcoming presence, non-judgemental. A hospitable environment is not an environment where the host counts the number of cakes your children have consumed, only to use the observation as ammunition later on.

Jesus speaks about hospitality in a very specific way.

Previous to this passage, Jesus has focused on the down-side of being a disciple, but it is not all doom. There is an up-side to following Jesus; the privilege of being recognised as Jesus' representative. We are the Lord's reps.

Those who receive the Lord's representatives – the disciples entrusted with the authority to do Jesus' work - receive them into their homes, but also – it is implied – receive their message or teaching. To receive the rep is to receive Jesus, for in Jewish thought 'a person's agent is like to him/herself.'

Not only is the disciple identified with Jesus because to receive Jesus is to receive 'him who sent me.'

God enters the house with Jesus' messengers. Remember that the next time you make a call.

The reception afforded to Jesus' disciples becomes the test of a person's relationship to God.

Those who pass the test will receive a reward, a reward proportionate to the importance of a prophet or a righteous person *(both of whom represent God in the Old and New Testaments)*.

This is where we deviate to consider the story of Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings.

The Widow acts to bring Elijah a 'cup of cold water' - she is receptive to Elijah despite being on the brink of starvation. You might think that her current predicament would have closed her reception of cries for sustenance. No wonder Elijah comforts her with words that are found throughout the Gospels: 'Do not be afraid', (v.13). Contrary to expectations, she is open hearted and obeys Elijah in the midst of great personal need. Her openness to Elijah is indeed rewarded, as the jar was not emptied and nor did the jug fail. Here as elsewhere, Scripture suggests that fear is a real threat to that relationship to God that we call faith.

As tends to happen to biblical heroes, Elijah is cared for by the woman, poor though she is. He is her house-guest in the upper chamber. When the Widow's son dies, she turns to Elijah who enacts faith through prayer, and her son comes back to life. A second time she is rewarded and does indeed recognise that God is with Elijah, and by welcoming him she has welcomed the presence of God into her home.

There are many other examples of hospitality in Scripture and in nearly all of them, the hospitality is offered without the expectation of reward; it is offered spontaneously, trustingly and in an attitude of wanting to attend to the needs of the other, despite the circumstances or needs of the host.

To give a cup of cold water was and is an essential act of courtesy and hospitality in the East. It is taken for granted, and deserves no reward, yet even this act of acceptance will receive one; God's rewards go way, way beyond our deserts. Jesus is not talking about philanthropy here, but reception of a person *because he or she is a disciple in the name of Christ*.

In sum, as disciples we are in the privileged position of people who, representing Jesus, also represent God, and whose reception is therefore the test of a person's attitude to God, leading to either reward or the loss of it. In the context of Jesus' time, these words were solid comfort for those who found the world against them because they belonged to Jesus. They are likewise intended to be

solid comfort for those who will belong to Jesus in subsequent generations.

Finally, it is worth noting that in many parts of Elijah's world, death was revered as a god. The story of the Widow of Zarephath shows that death is submissive to Elijah's God – Yahweh – the God of Israel. There is nothing that God cannot transform; nothing – no situation – that cannot be brought back to life. God hears Elijah and his prayer – so heartfelt – which hatches newness of life and a future. This can be true of our prayers, too.

Amen.