

**Sermon 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8), Yr. A @ St Johns – 28/6/20**

**“Receiving little disciples” (Matthew 10:40-42)**

**Pastor André Meyer**

Text... Pray: *Father, open our hearts to your word by your Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

The first disciples, the Twelve, were ambassadors for Christ. They were Jesus' representatives. As He sends them out in Matthew 10, Jesus gives them authority to cast out demons, to heal all kinds of diseases, to find the lost sheep of Israel, and to preach the good news of God's kingdom – the Gospel, sharing the news of God's Son, the Christ. They were being sent out like sheep among wolves. As such, He warned them to be vigilant and to expect persecution, troubles and hardships *because* they were His disciples. But though difficult, they were to trust Him and the mercy of their heavenly Father to provide for all their needs. Just as Jesus would be harshly treated, so too would they. He gave them no illusions as to how tough it would be at times. In the face of persecution, they were not to fear people, but to trust God and endure until the end for they would find true life and blessing in Him.

In our text today, the word “*receiving*” or “*welcoming*” simply means to provide hospitality for someone. In Jesus' day though, providing hospitality for travelling teachers (such as the disciples) usually meant accepting their message as well. Jesus revealed to His disciples that when they were received and taken care of by others, it was as if they accepted Jesus Himself; and as such, if they received Him, they were receiving God too.

Jesus is pointing us to examples of hospitality and welcome from the Old Testament. We might remember Abraham and Sarah who received three visitors during the heat of the day near the trees of Mamre (Gen. 18). They welcomed them into their tent and provided a meal, and no doubt, a cup of cold water to cool them from the desert heat. Little did they know they were entertaining heavenly visitors! As such, they received a blessing from God – Sarah would bear a child in her old age.

We recall the prophet Elijah as he travelled faithfully to the coastal town of Zarephath, where times were tough. He met a widow who was gathering a few sticks before going home to make a final meal for herself and her son that they “*may eat it and die*” (1 Kings 17:12). Not knowing this, Elijah asked for a drink of water and some bread. Though she was poor and had only just enough for herself and her son, at the risk of their lives, she provided Elijah the hospitality he needed. In return, she was blessed with a miraculous supply of flour and oil to see them through their tough times. Later on, through Elijah, the LORD brought her son back from death (also Elisha: 2 Kings 4:1-17).

In the Old Testament, receiving a prophet and providing hospitality for them was a big deal, and God blessed those who took care of His servants. Jesus builds on this, promising that God's blessings are returned to those who receive His disciples with hospitality. As they go out in Jesus' name to proclaim the kingdom of God, the amazing thing is that those who receive as a guest His disciples, are also receiving Jesus Himself, the One who has sent them to do His work. “*Anyone who welcomes (receives) you welcomes (receives) me,*” and also therefore, “*the one who sent me*” (10:40).

Jesus is affirming that when people take care of us because we are Christians, even if they may be unbelievers, God will take care of them for having taken care of one of His own children! God will be generous to them as they have been generous to welcome those who are also welcoming His Son. Jesus reveals God's heart towards all people. God is good to care even for unbelievers, even though He holds a special place in His heart for all who are His by faith.

What we do not see so clearly is that Jesus is also tackling another issue in our text. We hear there is a progression in whom He names as disciples in their ministry. There is a grading going on, isn't there? Apostles, prophets, a righteous person, little ones (or the youngest or least), who are my disciples... From those who are 'great' to those who are 'small.' What's He driving at? Who are these 'little ones' He's speaking of?

Jewish Rabbi's taught that the 'little ones' as Jesus calls them, were considered as the smallest, youngest and most immature among the Jews. The term 'little/small ones' was often used in a derogatory way with a negative, immature connotation, not only of young people but likely also of the poor, the disadvantaged, the 'unclean,' the uneducated, as opposed to those who were older, wiser and simply 'greater.' In worldly terms, welcoming a guest speaker from interstate or overseas, or a famous person hospitably into our homes would be a great honour and blessing for us in the eyes of our friends and peers. Sadly, that same grading might go on in our thinking at times as Jesus' disciples; those who are 'great believers' (who we think are much more important) as opposed to those who are 'small in the faith' (those we think are not as important). Jesus turns this way of thinking on its head.

Jesus is reminding His disciples, *and us*, that these 'little ones,' these 'little believers' in our eyes, are just as important to God as the 'prestigious' apostles and prophets. Jesus then speaks of offering the smallest conceivable gift to one from the most insignificant 'class' of His disciples. Even the smallest gift – a cup of cold water – the smallest act of kindness or hospitality attending to someone's need, offered to the smallest person of faith, and given with the right motive, does not go unnoticed by God. Yes, as Jesus reminds us, even the 'smallest' believer is 'worth more to God than many sparrows' (10:31), so, *we* are to have the same attitude. Jesus is speaking of all His followers who are considered as insignificant by other believers, whether they are children, the poor, of a different culture or skin tone to ourselves, refugees, or otherwise. Instead, in Jesus' eyes the 'little ones' are believers who stand *alongside* the apostles, prophets and righteous people. In other words, to God there is no difference, and so too, should there be no difference among believers as well.

For those who respond to the smallest needs of the humblest disciples, there will be a reward and blessing from God, just as there would be a blessing in receiving an apostle, prophet or righteous person.

The word for "*reward*" Jesus uses also means 'wage' (v.41). Whoever then receives a prophet will receive a remuneration or wage from God that is suitable for a prophet's faithfulness to Him. In Romans 6, St Paul today reminds us of the true wage we all deserve because of sin: "*For the wages of sin is death*" – physical death and spiritual separation from God and His love (6:23).

Jesus is quietly reminding us that truly, because of our own sinfulness, we are all really 'little ones,' for, "*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" (Rom. 3:23). None of us can claim we are more important to God than any other of His baptised children. Jesus addresses a self-righteous attitude within us that says we or someone else is more deserving of God's love, attention and blessing, than another. We are *all* poor in our sin. We all need the gift and hospitality of God's amazing grace through Christ and His death for our sins on the Cross. Poor as we are, God welcomes us into His family through baptism, and into His eternal home. And so, St Paul also encourages us with the Good News, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (6:23).

It begins with God loving us and meeting our greatest need – *we* who are insignificant and 'the least' as far as our sin is concerned. God doesn't shun us, put us down, criticize us, or give us guilt trips so we are motivated to do good – no, that is human religion. God's way is to welcome us – just as we are, sinful, sin-stained, broken and hungry for His acceptance and love. God welcomes us through Jesus His dear Son, then sends us out with His new life and filled with His Spirit, so we can share the same welcome – the same love and acceptance God has given to us.

As Jesus' disciples we are both receivers and givers of welcome and care. God receives us, and we receive those whom God brings before us each day. Sharing a simple act of kindness with someone, *anyone*, particularly '*one of the least of these*' might just put a weary traveller back onto the road of life and peace with God. We don't have to wait for a strategic plan, we can love our neighbour simply each and every day. So, whom will God call you to welcome in Jesus' name this week? God will bless the seeds of love we sow in Jesus' name. Amen.