

Even a cup of cold water

For an unusually short reading, our gospel passage this morning packs a few punches. It's a passage all about giving and receiving welcome, with the word used four times in just the first sentence.

The passage comes right at the end of Jesus' pep talk to his disciples which began 42 verses earlier as he prepared them to go out among their own people, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing the sick. He told them where to go, what to do and how to live, and to rely both on God and the hospitality and kindness of strangers.

The welcome they received was going to be very important to the success of their mission. They were to depend on the hospitality of strangers not just for food and drink but also for a bed for the night. Remember, Jesus explicitly told them *not* to take any money with them. They were to expect generous hospitality, but even a simple cold cup of water was to be gratefully received. And there's a *reward* for the hospitality provided. Those who received the disciples as God's messengers would receive the reward of both hearing and benefitting from that message – the message of the good news of the kingdom.

There's been a lot on the news recently about welcome on many fronts. But something that was possibly overshadowed by bigger stories was the 75th anniversary on the 22nd of June of the arrival of the Empire Windrush to the UK, bringing with it over a thousand West Indian immigrants to help fill the need for more workers after the Second World War. Between 1948 - the year that first boat docked – and 1971, over half a million migrated to Britain as part of the Windrush generation. Some of the Windrush generation found a warm welcome in parish churches but many did not. A quote I heard recently said that *'If the Church of England had welcomed the Windrush generation, its churches would have been packed to the rafters!'* They depended on the hospitality of strangers and it wasn't forthcoming. How sad and what a missed opportunity given that they brought with them a real seriousness about faith.

The Bishop of Dover, the Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the first black woman bishop in the Church of England, said of the Windrush faithful: *'They knew why they were worshipping God: they had much to be thankful for. This enabled their worship to be filled with praise and thankfulness. These were not cultural Christians: there was purpose in their worship.'*

Where they were not made welcome in their parish church, many Caribbean migrants left to join other denominations, especially the fast-growing Pentecostal churches – and we know that black majority churches in London are now some of the biggest churches in the UK. But others stuck it out, refusing to be put off by the cool welcome they received; they encouraged their fellow ‘Windrushers’ to get involved, and they campaigned for racial justice. And this possibly is the greatest gift that the *Windrush* generation has given the Church of England. As the Rt Revd Dr Rosemarie Mallett, Bishop of Croydon and herself a Windrusher, says: *‘The contribution of Windrushers to the Church has been to be present, and, by their very presence, they have reminded the Church about what its true calling is: which is to acknowledge and accept each person as a unique and beloved child of God.’*

And this is what I think our gospel reading is getting at today. What a compassionate welcome means is approaching each other through God – seeing one another through the lens of how God sees us, and putting God’s love both at the centre of our lives and at the centre of all our relationships. This is how we give and receive help, and it’s what makes us a true disciple of Christ.

If welcome was very much on Jesus’ agenda, it’s right that it’s also on ours as a church. Today’s passage is very timely given that, over the next few months, our church council will be focusing on ‘invitation and welcome’ as we engage with the Leading your Church into Growth material that Ely Diocese has bought into. It’s good material and helps us to look at how we grow further as an inviting and welcoming church.

As a church leader, it’s always pleasing to look out on a Sunday morning and see new faces at both congregations, especially when you see new faces becoming part of the regular worshipping community. So, if that’s you – on this ‘Thank You Day’ – I thank you for coming and being part of us. You are so welcome and we love you being here. We hope and pray that, if you haven’t already, you will find a place within the church community for the long term, and both give and receive as a disciple of Christ, using the gifts that God has given you.

Jesus spoke much about community in his teaching, both to his disciples and to the crowds that gathered to hear him. In the parable of the lost son, he spoke of a place to come home to; in Mark 3, he spoke of a family of brothers and sisters; of a caring fellowship in John 19 as he asked the disciple he loved to look after his mother when he was gone; and he introduces us in Luke 8 to the many who were part of his mutually supportive mission team, people like Mary

Magdalen, Joanna and Susanna, supporting Jesus and the disciples out of their own means – both giving and receiving.

Somebody interviewed for a magazine about church said, '*I'm not looking for a friendly church; I'm looking for a church where I can make friends.*' Absolutely! And I want us to be known all around as a church that has a wonderful family atmosphere – a church that welcomes everybody into the family – those who are single, those 'living on the edge', as well as people from different ethnic groups and of differing sexualities – seeing one another through the lens of how God sees us and putting love at the centre.

And, as we reflect on the 75th anniversary of Empire Windrush bringing those first West Indian families to the UK, you might be wondering *why* those parish churches in the 40s and 50s didn't throw open the doors and welcome them in. And it probably has a lot to do with *fear* – fear of the unknown; fear of difference; fear that their worship might change as a result; and fear that it might also change them. But, in *not* being welcoming, they closed their minds to the positive influence that people of serious faith would bring. And they clearly hadn't taken to heart that most popular command in the Bible – the one that appears 365 times as Marie reminded us last week – the command not to be afraid.

So, here in Cottenham, let's be *open* to what God is already doing among us. We look around and give thanks that God is bringing new people to our church – people of all ages but especially young families and people of colour. Let's be a community of faith that both *welcomes* and *celebrates* difference, as we grow God's church in this place, deepen our faith, and serve one another and the community around us, putting love at the centre of all we do.

Let's pray:

God, you are the open arms of acceptance, the warmth of a hearty welcome, the joy of a sincere smile.

We cannot see you, and Jesus walked the earth long before our time, yet we know by faith that he embodied your welcoming presence in his dealings with your needy children.

We bow before you in worship and adoration for all that you are, and pray that you would help us, as your church, to be inviting and welcoming to all.

In Jesus name, Amen.