

## SERMON 2 JULY 2107

We had a tough time last Sunday, reflecting on Jesus' confronting words about, amongst other things, causing division, and bringing not peace but a sword, even though he also told his disciples that every hair on their head was counted and that not even a sparrow fell to the ground without the Father's care.

Today, as a change of intensity, we are going on an imaginary journey, so leave behind your mobile phones because there will be no internet access where we are going; no emails can be sent or received, not even any Australia post with the deliveries still made to our mailboxes by delivery people on motor bikes. It's hard to imagine isn't it – though for many of us, this constant connectedness was not something we knew when we were growing up. I was thinking about this on Wednesday as I sat in a café having a coffee, looking at my mobile phone, as everyone else there who was on their own was doing. I was having a coffee there because I had to go into the RTA in person to register my car because, when I went to get the pink slip, the garage's internet connection was down and they had to remember how to fill in the paper form to give me to take in myself. The end result was an interesting conversation with a person behind the counter about the Scottish/English border wars. Now wasn't that much better than just tapping and pressing buttons on the computer?!

Back to our imaginary journey. We have ended up sitting in a simple but comfortable house. It is getting near the end of the day and the bustle of day to day business outside has quietened down. The house is full of the smell of the meal that you are now ready to enjoy as the family gathers around and asks a blessing on this food. Just as you are settling down to eat, someone knocks at the door. A stranger, who greets everyone in friendship and confirms that he is at the right house. You all welcome him in and he joins you at the meal, taking time to add his own blessing and give thanks for this meal. After a while, he tells you that he has come bearing a greeting and message from the little community of Christians who live some two day's journey away. You had met them a few months before, when, for the first time, you had really heard something about what these Christians were on about. It had touched you greatly and had brought joy to you as you had listened. You had longed to know more but could not stay. Since then you had thought about what you had heard about Jesus and had talked with your family about what you had heard. Some of them were sceptical, but others were interested. Now, with the arrival of this

unexpected messenger, you could learn more. As you shared the meal there was a wonderful sense of the fellowship of deep things shared.

Now you can come back here. If you need to reassure yourself that your phone is still there you can do that now! The point of that little excursion was that in today's verses from Matthew's gospel we hear some important things about messages given and received and about hospitality. These are the words which wrap up Jesus' coaching of his disciples, and Matthew's relaying this to his own community that faced difficult times. In these verses we see both the movement between the sender and the receiver of the message and the welcome that holds all of that.

It's easy to forget that, while some people did read and write in Jesus' time, and letters were certainly sent, as we know from the Epistles of Paul and others, these messages were all hand-delivered and then read out loud. The sender was the envoy, a word that is linked to evangelon and evangelist, a word, that, itself, is connected to the word "angel". The angels were the messengers, the envoys of God. Matthew's birth narrative tells of the angels conveying God's messages to Joseph and the Magi.

When we think about what was happening as the disciples were sent out, maybe our thoughts are coloured by those apparently hard, challenging words of Jesus that remain in our minds. But let us remember that the disciples were telling people about who Jesus was, about how he called them to look at their lives. They wanted them to see how God waited to offer them new beginnings and how he gave them hope of wholeness. When we wonder about the message they carried, let us remember the Beatitudes, and all those following verses that draw people back to remember their intrinsic, God-given worth, saltiness and light and so on. All of these were calling people to recognise the simple message of God's grace, forgiveness, peace and love. This is the Good News the disciples carried, the Gospel, the eternal truth that constantly calls us all back to look again at Jesus, to stand within the light of his being. We can imagine how people might have heard all this back then, and see, along with it, the concern for the oppressed, the sick and the needy that is the inevitable result of the gospel. Some would have found it heart-warming. Others would have felt threatened and would reject what they heard because it implies change. There is always a sharp edge to some responses.

The disciples, the apostles and all of us who stand in their footsteps, have been sent by Jesus, bearing God's good news. Sometimes these were welcomed, and those who welcomed them discovered blessing beyond their imagining. The hospitality of welcome was deeply imbedded in the culture of the times, and had been for generations. It was not, as it might be for us, just a matter of offering a meal or a cup of tea; it could be a matter of life and death in that harsh climate, when even a drink of water could make the difference. Stories that are embedded in such hospitality abound in the Hebrew Scriptures: think, just as one example, of Abraham giving food and drink, prepared by Sarah to the three unnamed strangers who appeared at his tent. They turned out to be envoys, bearing God's message that the old woman Sarah would have a child. There is more about hospitality as Jesus talks about giving a cup of water to the least, in which we are pointed forward by Matthew to Chapter 25 when Jesus addresses those who may wonder how they have cared for him. Jesus responds that when they have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the prisoners, given a cup of water to the thirsty, they have done it to him. Others have not reached out to welcome and help others will be cast aside. The gospel has not been shared.

Hospitality is about relationship: about learning about the stranger and of sharing of oneself. Without this engagement, life stagnates, ideas become set and barriers can build up instead of gaps being bridged. Hospitality is core to the gospel. It is core not least because this is how God is for us, ever welcoming, and how we become part of the Kingdom's mission of embodying the Good News.

Matthew indicates the dynamic between the sending one, who is God, made known in Jesus, and those who are then sent. There is a welcome to be offered and a welcome, equally received in the blessing that is shared. There is a giver and a receiver. It is always like this in life. What Matthew is describing is not just the sending out of those who have been especially called to this task, or who are known as prophets or the righteous, as we heard in the reading. He indicates also the importance of those who are the ones who create the welcome. It reflects the different tasks of the body of Christ: we are not all feet. Some are hands. Some are the mouths to speak, some are the ears to listen, and so on.

This welcoming is a wonderful dynamic that flows from the heart of God. We are all part of the telling, the living out of the gospel as we open ourselves in welcome. Ultimately it is God's invitation to us that creates all of this. The message that God

brings to us, in so many different ways, is about good tidings of great joy for all people. It is humbling to hear again of how God welcomes us. It is also something we don't always find it easy to comprehend. Words that express this most beautifully come from George Herbert, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet priest:

Love bade me welcome yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin,  
but quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in,  
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, "worthy to be here:

Love said, you shall be he.

I, the unkind, the ungrateful? Ah my dear, I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

This is an expression of the good news that all who bear the name of Christ carry. This is our God-send. This is what we find again as we come to the table where we are gathered in to share the bread and wine of God's welcome for us, and the blessing we discover. This is what we bear within our lives and offer to all we meet, in Jesus' name.