

*Whoever Welcomes You Welcomes Me*

Matthew 20:40-42

### Introduction

In the 10th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sends twelve disciples to share good news throughout the region of Galilee.

In today's passage, he speaks a word of welcome:

*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me."*

When it comes to welcome, I think the church needs to be careful.

I think every church sees itself as a welcoming church.

Is Manningham Uniting Church a welcoming Church?

Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote that she cringes whenever she sees an "All Are Welcome" sign outside of a church.

Do you agree with me?

It is probably better to under promise and over deliver. Saying unequivocally that "All Are Welcome" is a hard promise to keep. Don't you think so?

### Let us pray...

"Jesus said,

*'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'*"

Just so we get this straight: **whoever welcomes you welcomes Jesus**, and whoever welcomes your friend or annoying neighbour or family member or work colleague or elected official or mother-in-law or next-door neighbour or chatty seat companion on an airplane or vendor at the Victoria Market or grocery checker or hairdresser or the Uber driver or the kid who hit your new car with a tennis ball...and so on and so forth...welcomes God?

We could have fun with this, don't you think?

*“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

But would there ever be an end to such a list of those who are welcome?

If there *is* an end to such a list of who is welcome, what does this mean?

And if *not*, well - what does *that* mean?

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes any one of us welcomes Jesus, welcomes God.*

The message we hear in this morning’s gospel reading from Matthew was important enough to Jesus and to the early church that some variation on this theme shows up in each gospel, and often more than once.

Also, in Matthew’s gospel from chapter 18, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...”

and from chapter 25, “The king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me.’”

Mark includes similar verses.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus declares that “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

The Jesus in John’s gospel, in true poetic style, declares in chapter 13 “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

There are numerous other examples and variations throughout the New Testament record.

The bottom line emphasis seems to be on inclusion, reciprocity, welcome and doing for others— all those things it takes to build up community, to include the stranger as neighbour.

If we can believe the record of today's lesson and so many other passages, Jesus and the early disciples and later apostles put a high value on welcoming and proclaiming the presence of God thereby.

Now I need to mention this. Another issue with welcome is that it sets up a power dynamic. Those who already belong have the power to welcome those who do not yet belong. And if we have the power to welcome we also have the power to exclude.

I think it is helpful, then, to talk about different forms of welcome, each one requiring more a deeper intention than the one before it.

**A first level** of welcome says

*"You are welcome to come and experience who we are."*

In this **conditional** form of welcome, there is a clear line between we and you, and an expectation that you can join us if you become like us.

**A second level** of welcome says,

*"We welcome you to be who you are and to share yourself with us."*

In this *diversity* form of welcome, you can be you as an individual, but don't expect us to change.

**In a third level** of welcome, the invitation is this:

*"We welcome you as you are, and in welcoming you, we expect that we will change so that who you are will be a part of who we are."*

Now this is totally a different way of welcoming.

This could be called a **transformational** welcome.

The church often, including Manningham Uniting church, has imagined itself to be a welcoming body, but what form of welcome have we been extending?

Theologian, Kosuke Koyama, was correct when he observed: "Our society, even the religious community, works on the basis of mutual invitation.

Lutherans invite Lutherans (Mennonites invite Mennonites – for that matter).

As long as we conduct ourselves in such a way, we have the convenience of speaking our own religious and cultural language. Intellectually and spiritually, we live comfortably.

But Jesus is not enthusiastic about it.

The real meaning of hospitality, of welcoming is found in inviting someone who cannot repay you, someone who is unfamiliar to you.

And do we receive Christians of other theological persuasions?

If Calvinists, Armenians, Catholics, Protestants, Progressive and Orthodox also follow Jesus, do we receive them?

Why would we NOT receive anyone who follows Jesus?

We MAY not accept some details of their doctrines, but do we receive them as fellow believers in Jesus?

*Now I love to tell this story. There is a church within the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. It plights itself as a progressive church. It **welcomes** the LGBTQI plus community. It declares itself as a tolerant and inclusive church.*

*By the way I dislike the word, TOLERANT.*

*One day the minister in placement and two elders came to meet me. It seems that a group of Chinese Christians approached the church to explore space for worship. They wondered whether I know them. I told them I had no idea who they were. To cut the story short, I found out later that the Church Council rejected the request.*

***Do you know why?***

*Because the Chinese group's theology was too conservative and evangelical! Tolerant and inclusive church? I am so glad that we allow the Greek Evangelical Church to use the Historical church every Sunday. It was good to see them last Sunday at the morning tea. I have invited them several times!*

*“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

In his words we hear today, Jesus complicates things even further. Jesus imagines the church not as a welcoming body but as the ones being welcomed. In other words, the disciples are not the ones extending hospitality, but the ones seeking it.

*“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*

For Jesus, the church needs to learn to let go of the power to welcome so that it can open up itself to the possibility of being welcomed into God’s family. The church moves beyond safe terrain and seeks to build new relationships of mutual welcome so that all may be transformed by God’s love.

In other words, the work isn’t so much to build community as it is to seek community where it already exists, and to live with others as God’s beloved. Christian people are called to be welcoming, for in welcoming others, we welcome God.

### ***Can we at least agree on that?***

Once again “Jesus said, *‘Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’*”

Where and how do we experience such welcome today?

Is this what we hear? Or do we hear, instead, words of separation, words of breaking relationship, words of opposition and repudiation?

Where is our witness to welcoming others, and thereby welcoming Jesus and the one who sent him?

As followers of Jesus, we need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy.

Is Manningham Uniting Church truly a welcoming Church?

How important is it to be a welcoming church?

As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, *“Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to welcome strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”*.

Once again Matthew 20:40 to 42 in rhyme

He who receives you, receives Me

Receives the One who sent Me, He

Receive a prophet in his name

And receive his reward, the same

Receives the righteous in his name

And receive his reward, the same

Give a little one just water

A disciple, son or daughter

Believe me, you won't be ignored

You'll by no means lose your reward.

Amen.