

Welcoming in the name of Christ

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[0:00] We're in Matthew chapter 10, those three verses. It follows after that reading we had last week. The Bible has a lot to say about acts of compassion and hospitality, whether that's to the stranger, the alien, the poor and the needy, or anyone else for that matter.

Some of that was there in our Old Testament reading this morning, wasn't it? Abraham and Sarah receiving those visitors. And of course, it's there in Jesus' famous parable, the Good Samaritan. Teaching of the Bible is clear that we should give help, love to any in need who come across our path. As we've seen, there are strong elements of that in the Old Testament too.

We are to be, as Christians, good neighbours to all we meet. But this passage in Matthew 10 isn't about that. It's about showing particular care and hospitality to fellow Christians, not to those outside the church.

Take that as given. I'm not saying don't do that. But the focus of Jesus' teaching here is something particular. The you in verse 40, whoever welcomes you, refers to the disciples and in turn all those who would be sent out with the gospel message.

[1:15] All those who hold that gospel message. Same is true for the prophets who teach and apply God's word. The righteous people who live godly lives as disciples of Christ.

I pray that's all of us. Because all Christians, in fact, are followers of Jesus. And we're all included here. And if anyone gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you that person will certainly not lose their reward.

So Jesus is calling each of us to be purveyors of hospitality and welcome and neighbourly behaviour, particularly to other believers.

That's something that should mark us out. And since love in the Bible is always displayed in practical ways, what we have here is the same command Jesus gives to his disciples in John 13. That new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Jesus goes on to say, By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

[2:19] Jesus is commanding us to live a life of love and hospitality towards fellow Christians. And interestingly, he's telling us that there is something in it for us. A blessing, a reward.

Something that will make our efforts very much worth our while. I wonder how you feel about that idea. If I'm honest, it feels a little strange. Surely we should just do it out of love and devotion, not to get something back.

Maybe the idea of a reward conjures up pictures of money and honours and stuff. We know that's not where our heart should be though. We know that's not how God's kingdom works.

Jesus tells us elsewhere that in this world we will have trouble and testing and opposition. I'm listening to a great audio book at the moment about how the gospel of Jesus is spreading amongst Muslim people groups stretched around the world.

And many of those who come to faith report living with death threats, having been turfed out of their houses, shunned by their family of losing jobs and status, have been rejected.

[3:27] There's not much reward there, is there? But I suspect the reward Jesus is speaking about here is actually more of him. As well as the joy of knowing that we are walking in Christ's way, he's pointing us to a deeper closeness to himself, of knowing more of his love and grace and peace, of a deeper fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

The blessing and reward Jesus speaks about here is the blessing that comes through obedience and it is more of him. I think that makes sense because ultimately those bringing the gospel, living out godly lives, serving Christ, don't just bring and share a message but a person.

If we listen to them, if we welcome them, if we support them, then we will be recipients of the living words that they are seeking to bring. Occasionally, as a boy, I remember visiting preachers coming

to our churches and sometimes they would come and have lunch with us.

And listening around the dining room table at lunchtime, some of their stories were wonderful. They got lunch, we got more of Christ. It's been the same sharing meals with mission partners or evangelists or people from our congregations.

As we sit and hear the stories of what Jesus is doing in our lives, well, they get fed and watered and we get built up. We get to hear more of God's work in the world.

[4:54] That is a great reward. It feeds your heart and soul far more than a Sunday lunch or afternoon tea. The last example Jesus gives here shows that, doesn't it?

That of giving a cup of water to a little one, a little child, maybe a young believer. Jesus doesn't simply have sharing grand banquets in mind. He's speaking here about every act of kindness and service that flows out of a desire to bless and encourage other Christ followers.

Whether that's a cup of tea or a glass of water, whether it's time spent listening, giving a lift to the shops, a loan of a lawnmower, an offer to pray.

We're to show our love to one another in all kinds of deeds of kindness and shared time and lives and resources. And this is why it's so important.

Because those outside the church cannot see our feelings for one another, but they can hear our words as we speak about one another. And they can see our love in action as we show care and hospitality to others in our church family.

[6:01] I want to come back to this a little later. But we need to ask what this has to do with the verses that came before it. We didn't hear them today, but they were there in our reading last week.

So if your Bibles are open, just look back at those, that earlier chunk of Matthew chapter 10. Verse 33, whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Verse 34, do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth. I didn't come to bring peace, but a sword. So that, verse 36, a man's enemies will be members of his own household.

Verses 37 to 39, anyone who loves their father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me.

Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me, is not worthy of me.

Whoever finds their life will lose it. Whoever loses their life for my sake, will find it. The calling we have as Jesus' disciples, isn't to live in a way that means that we will necessarily be liked or popular.

[7:09] If that comes, well, that is wonderful. And there should be, of course, much in our lives that people should find attractive and magnetic. As Christians, we should be people who are loving, who are joyful, who are full of peace, great to be around.

We should be people who are patient and kind and good and make fantastic neighbours. If we're working, we should be colleagues who are gentle and faithful and self-controlled, super to work with.

These things should increasingly mark us all out as we grow up in our faith and grow in Christ-likeness. The problem comes not with our Christ-like character, but when we start to speak about our Saviour.

See, Jesus rules every part of this world, whether people acknowledge it or not. He is a Saviour who commands all people to obey and worship him, who calls all people to turn from their sin, which he gets to define, by the way, to trust in his death on the cross, which he says is the one and only way to know God and be saved.

He promises to come again to judge the living and the dead and establish a kingdom for those who love him. In our relativist, individualist, universalist age, Jesus claims about himself our uncomfortable truths.

[8:30] I think our culture quite likes Jesus as an advisor, as a good example, as a teacher of great stories and a really, really good man. But Jesus won't settle for that.

There is no single square inch of this planet and throughout all creation that Jesus doesn't look at and say, that's mine. That's how one writer has put Jesus' authority.

And such unequivocal, dogmatic, universal claims for Jesus' authority and rule clash with our culture so much that the more we find ourselves speaking about him and his claims, the more we find that people might reject us despite our godly Christ-like character.

And think about that. Jesus was the most perfect man there has ever been. There has never been anyone more kind, more patient, more loving, more faithful, more good than he.

And yet how was he treated? Rejected and despised by his own people. A man of sorrows acquainted with suffering. Jesus says, if they did this to me, you are my disciple, they'll likely do this to you as well.

[9:47] That's why supporting one another is so vital. It's why building communities in local churches where love and hospitality and service and kindness shine out is so important.

Because when life following Jesus gets hard, particularly when we find the world out there rejecting him, then every little act of kindness to us from one another between, in our church family, means so much.

Those words and acts declare our solidarity and love and fellowship as Christ's body here on earth. By those acts and words, we say to one another, I'm standing with you.

You're our sister, our brother. We have the same Lord. I love you. And I'm here for you. On Wednesday night at PCC, we heard from our diocesan missionary about encouraging all our churches to have what he called a missional DNA, to be outward focused, shining with the love and good news of Jesus.

We need to do that. It's great to hear already about conversations going on, a desire to be more open, more welcoming, to have the church open on more occasions, to welcome the community in.

[11:04] But if there is no deep love between us, if we're not a family of believers who show kindness and care and hospitality to one another, if we're not there in each other's pains and sorrows, if we're not there celebrating with one another's joys, as many of us were yesterday with John at the cathedral, if we're not sharing with one another the goodness of God's acts in our lives, then how will those outside of God's family see the love of Christ in our midst?

I don't think it's an accident that Jesus' ministry was full of meals. He seemed to spend his life going from one place to another, eating with different people. We're sharing one of those meals this morning.

There are refreshments afterwards, so please do say. Later in the summer, there are two opportunities to come and have afternoon tea at the rectory. Do grab one of those invitations and come along.

Times like that are vital for deepening the ties of faith that bind us together. Because our life as Christians together here should be marked out by those kind of acts of hospitality.

Maybe a season of hospitality over the autumn might help that along. For it's as we welcome others and are welcomed in to one another's lives and homes, we get to show the love of Jesus to each other in practical ways.

[12:30] Ways that draw us together, that draw us closer to Jesus, the master of the feast. the one who is the true bread and the water of life.

And as we do that, so the world will see that we belong to him. May God make us into that kind of church family here. Amen.