

**“Divine encounters” a sermon based on Matthew 10:40-42 and Romans 6:17-23 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 28 June 2020.**

Jesus said to his followers - “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” May these words sink into our souls. They name how everyday human interaction can give life, how something as ordinary as a welcome can be a divine encounter. These verses are often spoken of as a call to welcome people. But they’re not really a call. They are more naming a promise, a promise that emphasises the value of personal encounter and smallest act of care, the offering of a cup of cold water.

Let me describe the setting. Jesus and his followers relied on people welcoming them. As someone recently described it to me, they were couch-surfers. Sojourners, travellers, people who walked the way. Without healthy hostels, they needed people to offer hospitality. The earlier part of this chapter sets out what they were to do. As you travel, Jesus said, proclaim the good news. “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” But when they travelled, they couldn’t anticipate how they would be received. The movement wasn’t widely accepted or known or understood or appreciated. Indeed Jesus said – “I send you as sheep among wolves so be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

So they needed certain qualities. Courage to leave the safety of being with like-minded people, to risk speaking with people who had very different views. Sensitivity to read the moment, to discern what to say and how and when. How to negotiate their way with people who opposed what they stood for, and who did not like their opposition to the Roman Empire. Most of all, they needed to know that with all the disappointments and difficulties they were facing, going out to encounter people was worth-while.

So Jesus says “This is worth it, because when you are welcomed, the person who welcomes you welcomes me, and the God who sent me.” Putting it differently - “Carry God’s image out into the world, and do so with reverence, gentleness, humility, truthfulness, and love.” Yes, there is great risk involved. Of course there is. But there is also reward. What would happen if we believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighbourhood we enter, on email or twitter or

facebook or Instagram or ? I am not speaking about an arrogant, presumptuous, self-righteous, serious religious demeanour. I am speaking about having a humble sense of who we are in Christ when we interact with people.

What would happen if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for the neighbour? The disciples were saved from arrogance because there they were the least - fisherfolk, tax collectors, zealots, poor, with grating accents and coming from the wrong part of the country. Their only qualification was this – they sought to follow the man from Galilee. And yet they learned, as we do, that deeper personal encounters can reshape our thinking and influence the rest of our lives.

In 1983, I was in a group of students in the United States welcomed for afternoon tea into the home of John J Lewis of Atlanta. Lewis was a leader in the civil rights movement, at the time an Atlanta city councillor and who has been a congressman since 1987. We were from many different parts of the world and there was nothing remarkable about us. Yet he welcomed us into his home, and offered marvellous hospitality, answered our questions, shared his experience, spoke of his faith, and the deep struggle for civil rights. It was a divine encounter that affected us. We talked about the impact of that visit and how it shifted our thinking. What have been those encounters for you?

One of Eugene Peterson's books is entitled – Christ plays in ten thousand places. He quotes a Gerard Manly Hopkins sonnet – "I say more: the just man justifies; keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is – Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features of men's faces."

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye we are – Christ. All of this has implications for the church. For what is at the heart of the Church is not an institution or a theory or a set of moral principles. What is at our heart is an encounter, a personal encounter that always involves human with human in some way. And so the question to be asked in the church is this - where have we encountered Christ this week, this day, in this situation.

The singularity of that focus relates to Paul's theme of freedom. When we focus on the encounter with Christ, and on who people are in Christ, we put in their proper place what can divide and discriminate – education, age, ethnicity,

politics, preferences. When we see the other, we are invited to see what in God's eye we are – Christ.

That means that churches and congregations like ours will be, will aspire to be, will want to, will pray to be, as diverse in our preferences as any human community can be. We would want the only thing we have in common is that we have sensed Christ in one of a ten thousand places. Whether we are a prophet who speaks inconvenient truths, a person trying to do what is right, a little one, poorly thought of, the least of all, or whether we are a person returning from overseas, when we are welcomed, Christ is welcomed. Jesus said to his followers - "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

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