Trinity 111 [28.6.20]

Matthew 10: 40-42

**⁴⁰**"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

This short passage contains a lot of ‘welcomes’ and a lot of ‘rewards’!!

These are the closing words of what is known as Jesus’ Missionary Discourse, when, speaking with authority and clarity, he gives the disciples a series of instructions and warnings as they are sent out into the world to share his message.

The words in the verses immediately before those in our text for today are quite stark. Jesus leaves the disciples in no doubt that the work asked of them will not be easy. They will be like go out ‘like sheep into the midst of wolves’. He warns of how sons will be set against father and daughters against mother. He obviously meant to cause a stir with stern and uncomfortable words which his followers could not afford to ignore.

And yet it leads us straight into our text for today, with its emphasis on welcome and rewards. For the disciples, just as for us today, so much is to be gained in sharing and receiving the good news of knowing Christ.

We all have it in us to be Christ like in the way we love and care for each other, reaching out to everyone and especially those on the fringes of our society. When Jesus speaks of the ‘little ones’ he refers not only to children but also to those considered to be inferior and vulnerable. Matthew tells us later in his gospel that whoever serves ‘the least of these’ serves Christ. For those who respond without any discrimination towards those need, the reward is great. The ones who have given food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, who have clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited the prisoner are the ones who will know true blessing. For every time we meet and serve these people in need, we meet and serve Christ.

Jesus spoke directly to his disciples and made clear what was expected of them. Exactly the same is true for those who choose to be disciples of Christ in the 21st century. To be part of a faith community brings responsibilities as well as rewards. We, as members of the church, share the same inherent identity as those who were first ‘sent out’ into the world with the gospel message. The 21st century context may be different, but the church’s call remains the same: in spite of any and all opposition, we are to go out into the world, to contribute to alleviating human suffering and meeting real needs, to spread love and healing by acts of hospitality equivalent to offering a cup of cold water to the lowliest in Matthew’s community. And in doing so, we build our own relationship with God – the highest possible reward which no-one can take away from us.

When we read the whole section of the Discourse Message, we see that it is packed with action verbs – Jesus summons, gives authority to, sends out the disciples, tells them to go, to cast out, proclaim, to raise, to cleanse, to heal.

These are the verbs which still define the mission of the church today. We too, as individuals and as communities of faith, are challenged to do these things. Too often, perhaps, the church is preoccupied with institutional survival. But unless we act as God’s witnesses sent into the world, we are essentially NOT the church. There is no such thing as a church that is does not engage in such mission – when we cease to be missional, we are in danger of becoming no more than a cultural organization serving the needs of the consumer. If we claim to be disciples, we should think of ourselves as sent out into the world, ready to be the presence of Christ and to meet Christ in this world. To be this presence, to be the face of love and justice, involves taking risks. Jesus warned of family rifts, of facing insatiable wolves, of facing people who want to exploit power – but the reward is to inherit God’s kingdom as we help to build it, here on earth.

Jesus came to begin and establish a new way of being God’s people. Not surprisingly, those who were happy with the old way didn’t like having it disturbed. They were comfortable as they were, they didn’t need rescuing. That is as true today as it was when Matthew wrote his gospel. People naturally prefer comfort to challenge. But the challenge of Jesus’ sayings is matched by the remarkable promises he makes to those who accept them and live by them.

As disciples, we are called to live out our commitment to Christ. We are not asked to carry our magnificent, heroic deeds. We are asked to offer ordinary acts of kindness. When we give the least that courtesy demands, such as a cup of water, it will not go unrewarded. Our most ordinary gestures can carry some of the most profound meanings. What we are asked to give is the hospitality of an open heart which welcomes others, especially the ‘little ones’, knowing that when we offer these acts of kindness, we offer them also to Christ.

‘Whatever you do for the least, you do for me’ he said. It is a simple but profound message which can challenge and change people’s hearts.

God revealed his love in Christ, who passed the word to the disciples, and the disciples hand it on to those who listen to them and welcome them into their lives. How ready are we to live out what it means to be Christ’s disciples? To be active and committed to sharing the gospel message? To give and receive the welcome of Christ? We have witnessed so much of this during recent months, when people have supported each other during lockdown. Making a phone call, offering to do some shopping, making time to reassure people that they are not alone or forgotten. We will be glad to return to normal, whatever the new normal may be, but let us not forget that the emphasis on welcome and reward will continue to be as true today as it was when Christ himself spoke of it, and we must be prepared to do our part to fulfil God’s mission of love in the world.

Amen