

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 28th June 2020
3rd Sunday after Trinity

Collect

God our saviour,
look on this wounded world
in pity and in power;
hold us fast to your promises of peace
won for us by your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, 'Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.'

Matthew 10:40-42

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

Sermon

One of my mum's phrases when we were children was "you'll get your reward in heaven." You can imagine the scenario. We're being asked to do something we don't want to do. Maybe laying the table, or drying the dishes. It's not something we're going to receive payment for. My mum wasn't really one for bribes, so neither were we going to be offered sweets or chocolate, or even to go to bed half an hour later. And so, if we asked what we would get in return, out came the tried and tested phrase that our reward would be in heaven. What it felt like to a child was a completely empty promise. But it also meant that we became very little focused on reward as we grew up. Which makes this morning's reading, which appears to focus almost entirely on reward, rather difficult reading.

It's important, therefore, to understand what Jesus is talking about when he uses the word reward. While in popular usage we often think of a reward as being some kind of a prize or bonus, what Jesus was talking about was really more like the fair return – like wages for labour, or a fair price for goods. It's more about reasonable recompense than something extra, intended to entice or allure. And of course in these circumstances, we were indeed being rewarded for laying the table or drying the dishes. Because we were playing our part in the household community, and full belonging comes from the interplay of giving and receiving. We didn't need to wait until the hereafter for our reward. It came from being part of something bigger than ourselves as individuals.

And so, in this morning's gospel reading, we are invited to welcome prophets, the righteous and little ones, for which there will be reward.

I wonder how straightforward that sounds to you. Do you consider yourself to be good at welcoming people? We know that hospitality is a significant aspect of our faith. And this morning we are being invited to consider the extent of our hospitality. Who it is that we welcome.

Let's start with the prophets. Remember, prophets do not announce the future, but rather speak in the name of God. In the scriptures, the prophets are privy to God's plans and see everything through God's eyes. From the time of their calling, everything speaks to them of God.

How easy do you find it to welcome prophets? Think about Isaiah, a great poet and acute politician, but above all, a prophet. You will remember the story of Isaiah's call, where he encounters God in a vision of seraphs and burning coals, answering God's call in the words, "Here I am; send me!" Isaiah recognises his humanity and sinfulness yet God made him persevere and purified him. He therefore considers pride to be the greatest sin and sees salvation as coming through faith. Isaiah himself recognised that his message would harden some hearts. Those who wanted to rely on themselves. Who did not want to acknowledge their need of God. I wonder whether we can recognise times in our own lives when we have found it hard to welcome those who see our pride as a sin.

I often think the prophet Jeremiah would not have been a barrel of laughs to be around. He wanted to make his people aware that they had gone astray and the life they were leading would only end in catastrophe. His preaching emphasised that the people had abandoned God and must return to God. Is that a message we would want to hear, even if it had elements of truth?

It is often difficult to recognise the prophets of our own time. We might think of Greta Thunberg, and her activism on environmental issues. While she has undoubtedly received a fair hearing in

certain circles, it is fair to say she does not receive a universal welcome. It may be that for each of us we welcome her message as we faithfully separate our rubbish into separate bins for recycling, but turn a deaf ear when it might mean reconsidering other aspects of our lifestyle that impact on the environment.

There have been a number of apparently prophetic voices speaking up in the Black Lives Matter protests over recent weeks, too. Once again, we are perhaps prepared to join with those voices condemning the behaviour of police officers in Minneapolis, yet perhaps it is harder to be forced to face up to our own prejudices and indeed the ways the structures of our society have prevented human flourishing.

We might think welcoming the righteous is an easier ask, yet here again we may be called to challenge ourselves. Is it always easy to welcome those who display virtues that we find it hard to possess, whatever they may be? Sometimes we may find ourselves inspired by others' gifts, but sometimes their presence can leave us feeling inadequate. I wonder whether you sometimes find the goodness of others a challenge to yourself. Whether that goodness is generosity; a readiness to forgive; honesty; courage; self-control; perseverance. Sometimes the virtues of others can feel as though they highlight where we fall short, and that is uncomfortable.

Welcoming the little child may at first seem the easiest task of all. But within churches I imagine that all of us have had experiences of children being less than welcome. While the recent significant decline in church attendance, particularly among the young, means that children are now most often welcomed with open arms, we can all remember those "looks" when children made a noise in services not all that many years ago. For many – perhaps most – of us, welcoming children is a joy because they give us a fresh perspective on life. But they are unfailingly honest, which is not always comfortable. If they're bored, you know it; if they didn't enjoy the meal you just produced, you know it; and as they begin to ask "why", we are forced to explore our own motivations in a way we may not have had to do for some time.

So, if welcoming prophets, the righteous and little children is not always easy, what might be the reward of which Jesus speaks? That's really what we discover in the opening line of this morning's gospel reading. 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.' Our willingness to welcome those that Jesus welcomed – in this case the prophets, the righteous, and little children, but we might add the poor, the marginalised and the rejected – invites us into the space that Jesus shares with the Father. It is the way in which we join in God's work, sharing in the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a reward that does not necessarily make our lives easy – we know that because Jesus's life was not easy. But it is an invitation into life itself.

Jesus does not expect us to be more than human – just as the prophet Isaiah reminded the people of his time, our part is not to have pride in our own abilities, but to have faith in God. And when we do so, we find ourselves engaged in God's work, welcoming those that Jesus welcomed, and discovering meaning in our own lives.

Amen