

Just like the people of biblical times, are we not all looking for someone to give us a word which engenders faith and hope, a word which can ignite the smouldering embers of our heart unto a fire of a love which is beyond us. It is wonderful to meet people with such generosity of spirit. They inspire the same in others.

Meeting someone good can also threaten us. It faces us with the necessity of change in our own life. The cross of self-giving and change must be embraced if we are to open our minds and heart to God and others!

We can expect that Christ will come to our doors in many disguises and almost always at the wrong time! We may find him hidden in the stranger, the outcast of society, the neighbour, the child needing attention, the sick person.. There are many delightful fairytales of princesses hidden in rags and of princes imprisoned in toads. Every child's eyes light up in wonder at the moment when the disguise is dropped and the truth is revealed. Openness to wonder, to the mystery of Christ hidden in the other: these qualities are often sadly missing in my life.

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

In other places his words are recorded:

- “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...”
- “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.’”
- “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”
- “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

Time and again in scripture the 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. It's pretty clear that Jesus and the early Church put a high value on welcoming and proclaiming the presence of God thereby.

Such an understanding of hospitality, of the obligation of welcome, dates back to well before the time of Jesus. It was a matter of survival and community health which translated into the religious understanding of what God wants of us. **Xenia**, meaning "guest-friendship, the ancient Greek concept of hospitality, was considered to be particularly important in ancient times when people thought gods mingled among them. If one had poorly played host to a stranger, there was the risk of incurring the wrath of a god disguised as the stranger. It involved important rituals of welcome. Derivations included **Theoxenia**, and **philoxenia**, which literally means 'love of strangers.'

Hebrews 13:1,2 says, *“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”*

Above all of Jesus’ theological presuppositions, it is a *theology of welcome or hospitality* that most clearly defines his mission and ministry. Many of the narratives found in each of the four gospels centre around Jesus’ teachings about what it means to welcome someone, to include them, to show hospitality. Before there was healing, there was a welcome. Before a miracle, there was a welcome. He welcomed sinners and outcasts to join him at the table to eat. He welcomed the little children, those considered by the culture to be invisible, to come to him. And he welcomed the women in his life, also a cultural boundary not to be crossed, to sit with him and discuss things of importance.

This is a theology of welcome!

“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 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.”

So, what will it take for us, the church, to construct and practice an authentic *theology of welcome*? The first thing it will take is for us to

reaffirm that little things matter—that small gestures of kindness and welcome are deeply remembered. We've become so oriented in our society to believing that we have to be heroic, that we have to make grand gestures, and that more is better and we have forgotten that little gestures of kindness and welcome make the biggest difference in the lives of others.

Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. The life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures, small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but which have cosmic significance because they have been offered God.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is the conclusion of a great story about ordinary people invited by God to do extraordinary things in God's plan. It seems the invitation always comes with a test: will those invited say yes? Jesus seems to say that anyone can be welcoming, but righteous people who welcome are the ones in whom God is interested. Righteous people are the ones who give cold water, not out of duty, or because it's fairly easy, but because they truly love God who gives us all things. Jesus has been teaching us this all through the readings from Matthew this month. Righteous people are not "holier than thou." They are people in a covenant relationship with God. They are tested, and they have said yes, often many times. They all have generosity of spirit driving them to welcome.

We live in a conflicted age. What divides us seems more evident than what unites us. We take sides easily. We pour scorn on those who don't share our views. If this is so of the social and political life, where, after all, hurling insults are part of the game, nowadays we find ourselves in a church where conflict grabs the headlines away from everyday acts of kindness and love.

Following Jesus is not all about fighting for a Cause. God doesn't need our help and what God wants will finally be done on earth as it is in heaven. Following Jesus means walking into a holy, gentle, self-forgetting lifestyle lived in community. It means a costly learning to be like Jesus. One of the signs that we are doing this is our willingness to open our arms to others, and to take the risk of being abused in the process. Yet risking being used, and indeed of losing everything, means following the path Jesus trod. In

human terms, Jesus is the great loser. Yet, through his loss, Jesus becomes Christ the Victor, and in him his victory is also our own.

To live with sincerity in our culture of cynicism is a difficult dance — one that comes easily only to the very young and the very old. The rest of us are left to tussle with two polarizing forces ripping the psyche asunder by beckoning to it from opposite directions — critical thinking and hope.

Of course, it is well known that learning to love others begins with learning to love one's self!

The West Indian Poet, Sir Derek Walcott who dies on St Patrick's Day, wrote:

LOVE AFTER LOVE

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

And then, in the words of Henri Nouwen:

"Each day holds a surprise. But only if we expect it can we see, hear, or feel it when it comes to us. Let's not be afraid to receive each day's

surprise, whether it comes to us as sorrow or as joy. It will open a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new friends and celebrate more fully our shared humanity”.