

Welcoming Community (Everybody Welcome 1), 26th June 2022,
Second Sunday after Trinity
Deut 10:12-22; Matthew 25:31-46.

At Kosmik today, Iwan and Anne's daughter Sofie will be baptised. At the end of that important ceremony, Iwan and Anne will turn *to face the congregation with Sofie*.

I will say: **There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism:
Sofie, by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body.**

**All: We welcome you into the fellowship of faith;
we are children of the same heavenly Father; we welcome you!**

We use this greeting whether it is a child or adult baptism.

Over the next four weeks, we will be focusing on some important ideas of what it means to be a welcoming community.

We welcome you into the fellowship of faith. We are children of the same heavenly Father, we welcome.

Just want to focus upon a few verses in Matthew.

34 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.... I was a stranger and you invited me in,

37 'Then the righteous will answer him, 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in...?

41 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me ... 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in...

44 'They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger...

"I was a stranger and you invited me in."

It is a parable about the final judgement. By the Son of Man. By Jesus. It repeats 4 times 6 situations of need. Yet when we read the NT, we see that Jesus is not saying salvation is based upon good deeds. Salvation is for those who believe and trust in Jesus, as Lord, Saviour, and who turn - repent - away from their previous self centred lives. Instead these responses to need, are fruit, indicators of a Christian, of someone following Jesus.

This heart for the needy - in this parable I am assuming the brothers and sisters of mine refer to fellow Christians, whether Jew or Gentile - but these situations of need, the challenge to respond to them, would surely come under loving your neighbour, as the Parable of the Good Samaritan points to quite a few of them in the actions.

The word for stranger in this Greek is xenos. From this word we get xenophobia - the fear or hatred of what is perceived to be strange or foreign. Jesus points to his people not be xenophobic, but love for the stranger, the foreigner. And this is part of the character of the Godhead.

Deuteronomy 10. Moses is teaching, for the last time to the people of God, the last crack at them before they enter the promised land. Moses describes who God is. At the start of their time in the wilderness, God had revealed his nature,

in Exodus 34, which says "the LORD THE LORD, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."

Here Moses shares further who God is : For the LORD your God is God of Gods, and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome - *words we know well in our songs etc*

who shows no partiality, and accepts no bribes - *pure, holy, unbiased - again well known...*

Then...

"he defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."

Part of who God is, Moses says is - he loves the alien - the foreigner, the migrant, the stranger. And he says the Hebrews are to love aliens too - because God does - and because they were... This theme of caring for the widows, the fatherless, the alien / foreigner, is repeated many times in Deuteronomy. A generous and a welcoming community. Love the ones who are stranger or foreign. So when Matthew 25, read by Jewish believers in Jesus - to whom it was first written - this is not a new list, this is what has been expected of the people of God since the days of Moses. It is possible to say that that is the OT for nation, and we are a Body scattered across the nations. Yet the laws are grounded upon God's character - which never changes. So if Deut 10 is describing who our God is, then as worshippers and followers of God, we need to find ways to express and reflect God's character in our lifestyle...

"I was a stranger and you invited me in" reflects God's character.

Now when we read the word "invited me in". We can immediately think of that era. How in Matthew 10, Luke 9 and 10, we hear of the disciples going out in pairs and seeking hospitality in the towns. We see it in Acts - Peter stays with Simon the Tanner, Paul and Silas are welcomed into business woman Lidia's home. And other examples of hospitality are indicated in Paul's letters.

The word used for invited me in. Is **Synago**. **This Word means gathered together. Draw together. Collected** - like fish in a net. To join together, to join into one what was previously separate. If you follow the use of this word in Matthew for example, you see it often used connected to gathering - Herod - gather the teachers when the Messiah will be born. John the Baptist says Jesus will gather the wheat into the barn. Jesus says - when two or three are gathered in his name.

So people gathered together, drawn together, joined together, joined into one. A community is formed, people are drawn into a community. Jesus says - when I was a stranger, you synago - gathered me, joined into one what was separate, drawn together. I think it is, there are different approaches to hospitality. There is my house my castle - and you are passing through, I am not trying to build relationship or community with you. And there is 'my house is your house' . You are part of this family as long as you are here. The stranger is welcomed in, and the physical actions, heart actions, head actions all line up. When you invite in a stranger, welcome, do you seek to form community, draw them into your community, or 'my house, my castle.'

To move on. **How can we be a welcoming community? How can a stranger be gathered in, joined into one with us, they were separate and now are drawn in.** Well it comes down to our actions isn't it? Jesus says - I was a stranger, you invited me in.

We need to consider, as strangers come to this congregation - strangers - people who are not yet friends. I love a quote in the home group materials when they looked at this issue:

"The spiritual discipline of hospitality is a continual process of transforming sojourners into kinfolk and strangers into friends." We are an intentional community - a body - brothers and sisters in Christ - and so the stranger, the fellow Christian who comes from whatever town or country or denomination - is a spiritual sibling. And yet to invite them in, to join them together, to gather then into this community, takes our actions and the call to be generous. We shared last week, generosity in the early church was much broader than financial giving. It was also about space, time, energy and simply using what they had to give.

I thought on this. I remember my friend James. James joined uni when I was in my last year. James was a Christian and he was part of the Christian Union. Years later he told me, how Stu - one of my best friends of mine - and I had welcomed him into the networks and groups. He said he was a bit in awe of us, as we were these more mature Christians - he didn't know us very well, just ask Jolanda. He said, rather than keeping to our friendship circles and you all go out together in a tight group, we invited him in. I was never aware of that. James also did and still does find social settings tricky. It meant a whole lot to him what we did. I don't remember any conscious decisions. I remember as CU we were committed to all being welcomed - regardless of

church background, nationality, Christian spirituality, personality.

Looking back.

Three years ago, in 2019. Over the past 3 years, Benji and Marit settled into Macclesfield, found a church community to be part of. They arrived as strangers in congregations. Ruben went to Capenwray and he shared a room with 3 other guys, study for 6 months with a bunch of people he's never met. Julia, went to Israel, joined an Anglican congregation she didn't know, interns she worked with she has not met.

Ruben, Julia, were be strangers, compared to how they are here. Prayers that were prayed for them, included words like settle, like being connected, feeling at home, feeling part of the group etc etc. You were praying, in effect, for people to act, to invite in, to live out the words Jesus says.

Let the way you prayed for Ruben, Marit, Benji, Julia, be a model for how you act within this community.

As you imagined people welcoming them in, may you in the same way welcome the strangers who come here. Not just a pleasant hello, but to help them become joined to this community, drawn into this community of All Saints.

You see for some people coming, people will be praying for their friends, brothers and sisters, moving to Amersfoort. Praying the same things you may well be prayed for Marit, Ruben, Benji and Julia, as well as what you may have prayed for Simon and Lici, Kate and Reinier.

That as Jesus says: **I was a stranger and you invited me, welcomed me in. There will be people coming and people who are here, for whom God is inviting you to be an answer to prayers...**

Conclusion: Joined together.

Welcome takes many forms. Welcome on a Sunday morning or at other services - welcome before the service, welcome within the service - someone is lost where we are in a book and you point it out or share you book - welcome afterwards, getting to know them, if convenient introducing them to others in this congregation. That is all good stuff. But we said it is about joined together, drawn. So a person is truly welcomed, and this is part of my heart for All Saints, that each person who comes to All Saints goes on a journey, accompanied and led by you that helps that person become part of the heart of this community, not to feel on the outside, but to arrive at place of having friendships, feel accepted, contributing to the life of this community. That is what a welcoming community looks like.

It builds upon the foundation that we are a community intentional formed by the Lord - we are one Body, we are brothers and sisters in Christ and through Christ; to form and sustain a truly welcoming community takes generosity - time energy, space, and other things. A welcoming community is what the Lord desires of his people -

"I was a stranger and you invited me in..."

Shall we pray:

Heavenly Father,
you have welcomed us into your kingdom
and your heart's desire
is to draw every human being to yourself.
Grant us clear eyes to see people as you see them,
sensitive feet to stand in their shoes,
and warm smiles to welcome them in your name.
Give us such generous hearts,
that our church becomes a foretaste of heaven
where every soul you send us, finds their loving home
in the community of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen