

Year A Proper 13, 28th July 2026

Jeremiah 28: 5-9. Romans 6:12-23. Matthew 10:40-42

How many times have you come out of church thinking, gosh they were an unwelcoming bunch people? If you have never experienced that then all I can say is lucky you. Markie and I have left two churches because of being made to feel unwelcome and went to a third where no-one said a word to us either before or after the service.

Sadly, all three churches were in Scotland, but you'll be pleased to hear none of them was in the Scottish Episcopal Church, they were all Church of Scotland churches.

If we can't be welcoming, if we can't be hospitable, then why would searchers for meaning to their lives stay if the gap between the Good News we proclaim and the reality we present is a gaping chasm that you can't miss?

Be welcoming, be hospitable is a message that has been delivered innumerable times from innumerable pulpits and lecterns over hundreds of years – and rightly so. Here at St James we have a good record inside and outside the church, both in Penicuik and as far afield as Ghana.

But when you read today's Gospel carefully – and it's the shortest Gospel of the year and probably the shortest in our three-year cycle so I'll read it again – you realise Jesus isn't teaching his disciples about extending welcome or offering hospitality, he's talking about being welcomed, about receiving hospitality. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.

And that puts a very different slant on it. Jesus' words are about what it feels like and looks like for Jesus' followers – that's us – to accept welcome in his name. We're not always very good at receiving are we? We can feel awkward can't we, especially when we feel we are receiving far more than we can give back in return.

Markie and I are friends with a couple who have done very well in life and are incredibly generous – not just to us but to all their friends. The only problem is we are not allowed to reciprocate, to the point of being embarrassed to accept any more of their hospitality.

And yet that God is exactly like that. In terms of giving and receiving we are not, and cannot ever be, in an equal relationship with God. For a start, our salvation comes from Jesus' gift of self-sacrifice on the Cross.

Let me quote you a handful of verses to illustrate just how much God wants us to receive all that he has to offer, far more than we can imagine.

In Malachi 3 God says Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house and test me now in this if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.

In Isaiah 55 God says come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

In John 7 Jesus says Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them.

In Revelation 22, it says let the one who is thirsty come and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life

I could quote many more examples, but the point is clear, God doesn't care that our relationship in terms of who gives what and who receives what is so one-sided. God just longs for us to receive all that he has to offer and he doesn't want us to feel the slightest bit embarrassed about doing so, even though what we can offer in return is miniscule in comparison.

I want to change tack here.

It's interesting, isn't it, that this passage from Matthew is paired with our Jeremiah reading, where we are reminded that it is more important for us to speak into the reality of a situation, as Jeremiah does, than it is for us to give people a cosy, comforting message, as Hananiah does, because that's what we think people want to hear.

A lesson that politicians across all parties in most countries would do well to heed.

Like politicians, Christians cannot be all things to all people, there are times when we need to say uncomfortable things. And perhaps what we have lost

sight of is that we have more power and more right to say those things when we do so from the margins rather than from the centre.

The problem for Christianity in many parts of the world is that it has become too accustomed to speaking from a position of privilege, almost benevolently extending welcome and hospitality to those less privileged than ourselves.

But what if decentering is a good thing? I think it is to our advantage that the SEC is not the established church in Scotland, we have no position of power to defend.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus tells his disciples that the people who welcome them will be richly rewarded. In other words the rewards also go to the people who serve, the people who open the door, who do the clearing up, as well to the people at the front, the charismatic evangelist who everyone has come to hear.

To Jesus, the hierarchies we cherish within our own religious institutions are not necessarily the ones he cherishes. Remember that Jesus reminds to do our good deeds in secret rather than make sure that everyone knows about them. Small gestures, kind words and unseen kindnesses are what please God, the things that point to the breaking in of God's kingdom. Jesus came to offer us abundant life, and at times that can be as little as a cup of cold water.

Whoever welcomes you, ie the disciples, in other words, you and me, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. That's quite staggering isn't it when you think about? When Jesus commissions us as his disciples, and we are all his disciples when we put our trust and hope in him, he is putting his reputation, his standing, in our hands. What a risk he took then and what a responsibility we have.

What would happen to the world if we worked on the assumption that Jesus is visible through us in our every interaction, in our every conversation, in our every relationship? I suspect that at the very least we would choose our words more carefully, and we would probably speak less and listen more.

In conclusion I want to say a little more about our Old Testament reading. We have two prophets offering diametrically opposing messages. The Babylonians have conquered Jerusalem and carried off many of its leaders into exile and the

few people still remaining long to hear a promise from God that their oppression will soon be over.

And along comes Hananiah to say that the time of exile is over and that God will very shortly restore all that has been lost. Of course it's exactly what they want to hear, the hard times will soon be over because God is going to fix everything. It's a message of nationalist hope and divine favour.

There is only one problem. It's not a message from God. Along comes Jeremiah, with a literal yoke around his neck and shoulders. Hananiah's prophecy offers cheap comfort and false hope. God's favour is not something we can take for granted.

Jeremiah reminds Hananiah and his audience, and by extension us, that Israel's true prophets warned of war and famine. In other words they told hard truths that people needed to hear. Hard truths about God's disappointment, his anger and his sadness. Hard truths about the need for repentance, hard truths about the high cost of justice, about the need for patience and sacrifice.

On the basis of their respective messages, it is easy to imagine Hananiah being offered a cup of cold water. It's easy to imagine doors being slammed shut in Jeremiah's face.

The thing is, we are not free to soften the Gospel just to make ourselves more popular. We have not been commissioned to say what is trendy or makes people feel comfortable, we have been commissioned to say what is true, because false hope is not God's hope, an easy peace is not necessarily God's peace.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke about God commissioning us to go 'ready or not.' Even though not everyone will open the door or offer us the glass of water that we hope for, we still have to go, we still have to speak, we still have to carry God's image into the world with love, with gentleness, with truthfulness. Yes, there is risk, but there is also reward.