

Whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one that sent me

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What is it that first brought you to church? To any church and to this church specifically. It will inevitably be different for all of you- and I should say that there is no shame in saying because it's closest or just our parish church, indeed, that is as it should be. Interestingly, when I ask people this question directly they often say to me that what brought them to this church specifically, to St Mary's, is that it is a welcoming community.

Welcome is such a critical part of the ministry of the Church, and of the calling of all Christians. It is the culmination of our Gospel this morning. Jesus makes abundantly clear that it is part of the DNA of being a Christian, being a follower of the God of love, to welcome others and by welcoming them, we welcome God.

Of course there are different types of welcome. For some people, the best way we can welcome people is to, conversely, leave them alone. Many people need space or silence or simply a place to encounter God which is different from the busyness of ordinary life. A welcome to them might look very different to a welcome to others. I recall a church in Oxford where the welcome consisted of a very large man wedged behind a very small desk who would shout 'get out, get out, get out' at people as they came in the church door. Oxford is a strange place and many of the people who would otherwise not have come to church needed a sense of curiosity to propel them in. And what stimulates curiosity more than someone telling you not to come in somewhere? Bizarrely, it worked. Fear not, that is not a policy I am suggesting for St Mary's: but the fact that different people's welcomes will look different is not a sign of failure but of the reality of different tastes and different contexts. The discernment of that is the role of wisdom, of which the Epistle of James speaks.

Yet- we can acknowledge that there are different types of welcome but, there is an even more important question here: why do we welcome at all? The principle of why we welcome is important and interesting theological question and worthy of our time today. Why do we welcome?

Crucially, we don't just welcome because it is the polite thing to do. Here, our welcome ought to be absolutely rooted in the example of Jesus Christ. We welcome others because Christ first welcomed us. Indeed, Christ is the very embodiment of a welcome for all, a God who seeks us out and welcomes us into the Divine Love, despite our failings and the fact that we might not always deserve to be welcomed. And that means it is a welcome that is as much expressed in those arms flung open on the cross as it is in any act of obvious altruistic love or care. The mechanics of our salvation: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension: these are the acts which welcome us into the heart of God. People who don't always deserve to be known and loved by God, not only welcomed but brought into his very heart. That is

the example of Christ: perfect grace as perfect welcome. That is not an easy example to follow because it means welcoming everyone. Think, who might you find difficult to welcome into church?

And that welcome means welcoming the smallest as the least, welcomes the weak as well as the strong, welcomes those with whom we disagree as much as those with whom we agree, welcomes those who we are delighted to welcome and those whom we might find it more difficult to welcome.

Yet all of this- all of this ministry of welcome requires us to act. Christ in our Gospel says that those who welcome others welcome him, that is to say the God who is perfect welcome itself. But this is not a passive action. It requires us to act- even when it is the case of the person who wants to be left alone- there still need to be chairs put out, prayers said, liturgy assisted with. Christian welcome is more than politeness and it is more than just saying hello: Christian welcome is about creating the environment where God can be encountered and known and loved.

So a challenge to all of you: what are you currently doing to make this place a place where God can be known and loved? Is there something more you can do? Might you help with meeting people at the door, or with preparing things behind the scenes, might you help with the chalice or with the coffee, might you learn how the sound works or for all are ministries of welcome. And when we welcome others, we make welcome God to dwell among us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.