

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY 28<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2020

### ORDINARY 13A

#### READINGS: Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23; Psalm13

Have you ever been thirsty? I mean really, really thirsty. So dry and dehydrated that you long for water. When you have a dry mouth, and you feel hot and bothered, and starting to feel unwell. All of us, I'm sure, can remember times when we would give anything for a cup of water.

This extreme thirst happened to me when I went to a huge outdoor church service in Germany three years ago. The service was to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation – the series of events that led to protestant churches being formed. This service was held out in the fields on the river flats outside Wittenberg, a small town south west of Berlin.

There was around 120 -150,000 people present at the service, all sitting out on the grass in the sun, with the worship leaders, choir and orchestra up on a huge raised stage. Because of the size of the crowd, the service was transmitted onto about ten gigantic screens. Just as well, as we wouldn't have otherwise been able to work out who was speaking as we were about the length of the MCG away from the stage. And, of course, they had big banks of speakers to ensure that we could hear.

A lot of the service was in German, but some of the hymns and the sermon were in English. And some of the other hymns we recognised by the tune and could sing along in English. And many of the prayers were translated into English on the bottom of the screen. It was a communion service. Can you imagine the logistics of that? Communion for 150,000!

Well, they had lots of tables scattered across the field. Each table was spread with a white cloth, with the bread and the wine; and each table had a minister and assistants to serve the communion. And when the bread was broken on the main stage; they too, broke bread. And when the wine was blessed; they too, blessed the wine. And they came to us and served us, rather like the way that the elders come and serve you at a Presbyterian communion services. The only difference being that we were sitting on rugs on the grass rather than in pews.

It was a very moving experience, but by the time the communion was distributed we were all very thirsty, and a small sip of wine wasn't enough to allay our thirst. For we had become very hot sitting in the blazing sun with no shade. The service had started at noon and had gone for nearly two hours, and we had been sitting in the sun about an hour before the service started, and walking for a couple of kilometres across the countryside before that. I guess that the organizers would never have anticipated that the temperature would be in the mid to high thirties in northern Germany in May. They would have probably been more worried about the possibility of rain ruining their service than thinking about the possibility of heatstroke.

Our group had all taken water bottles with us to the service, but we had well and truly drunk all our water by the time the service ended. The problem was that we had several more hours of speeches and a concert to go before we were to leave the service grounds.

Thankfully though, the organisers were prepared with a good supply of water, and at the end of the service, lots of young people, many of them scouts, started circulating through the crowd handing out bottles of water. They were a very welcome sight, and although the water wasn't very cold, it quenched our thirst. And all though the long hot afternoon that followed, those young people continued to distribute more and more bottles of water to the grateful, thirsty crowd.

It was a very basic, but very important form of hospitality. Offering water to the thirsty. And although there was much more given – in the form of food, music, entertainment, and security to keep us safe, that water was so, so important. If there had been no water provided, we wouldn't have enjoyed the day as we would have become dehydrated and unwell. But, the provision of water enabled us to enjoy a memorable day right through to the end.

It's a lovely thing to be made welcome, to be made to feel that we are cared for and respected, like we were at Wittenberg.

But Jesus was often not made welcome, nor were his disciples. Following Jesus was no easy journey for the disciples.

Today's gospel highlights this. It is the climax of one of Jesus' great teaching sermons. Jesus has been fairly tough on his disciples all the way through chapter 10. He has called his disciples to very demanding tasks: to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to preach in the streets, and to cast out demons. Money, clothes, home, and family are to be put aside; persecution is expected if not welcomed! Jesus' followers are to be fearless in witnessing to God's kingdom. But then Jesus finishes with one final command: "*whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you none of these will lose their reward!*" (Matt 10:42)

What!!!?

The disciples have given up their homes and their jobs. They've taken on the exhausting business of healing and exorcism. They have risked their lives taking the gospel into the streets. Yet here Jesus says a cup of water given to a parched throat will do the trick just as well!!

For most of us every-day followers of Jesus, this is very good news. I mean, we're generally not much good at casting out demons. We'd rather stay seated right here than take the gospel into the streets! We tend to want to look after our families rather than people on the street. We're far happier receiving praise than persecution. But if there's one thing **we are good at**, one thing **we can do** to open the doors of the kingdom of heaven, **it's giving hospitality**. We can all turn on a tap and get a thirsty person a glass of water. So, we can say, "Thank God for hospitality!"

Isn't this good news? We see big successful churches with lots of young people and we worry about what we're doing wrong. Often churches like ours feel like failures because of our failure to attract and keep young families and young people.

But here, in this gospel, Jesus is telling us that small is very important. He celebrates small, trivial acts of faithfulness, simple acts of kindness that don't get noticed by the world. For the church of Jesus Christ, smaller might even be better.

"Thank God for that!"

What is Jesus on about here? How can a simple act of kindness make any difference? In a world as broken and fragmented as ours, in a world where people struggle with all kinds of burdens, like huge debts, addictions, exploitations, deep loneliness, a simple act of kindness, a welcome to a stranger, a little genuine hospitality can be downright dangerous. Offering a welcome can mean lowering our defences.

In a world where people are attacked in their homes, answering the front door becomes an act of faithfulness. Offering food to those in need can make us vulnerable to abuse. Even giving directions to a stranger can lead us to second thoughts. Holding someone's hand can be misinterpreted. Visiting the hospital or nursing home risks us coming face to face with the sick, the dying and the lonely. Saying, "I love you" means risking being vulnerable with another person.

Brian Cole tells the story of how when Bishop Ken Goodson went to dinner with his friends and colleagues at the end of a church conference. Bishop Goodson took the time to welcome the waitress who was serving his table. As he and his friends and colleagues joined hands to say a prayer before the meal, the bishop invited the young waitress to join them. Bishop Goodson thanked God for the day and asked God to bless the food, to be with them in their time of fellowship and throughout the night.

Then with the worn-out hand of the waitress wrapped in his, he prayed, *“God, we thank you for the way our waitress has served us this evening, for the way she has cared for us and served us well. If there is anything hurting her, if there is a place where she needs healing, grant her your presence and your love in the same way she has been so hospitable to us tonight. Amen”* The young woman burst into tears and said, *“Thank you. Today has been a terrible day. Nothing in my life is going right just now. How did you know?”*

The bishop did not know, or did he? Maybe he noticed something? But he offered prayer in a moment of need. This is what Jesus is saying to us. We need to be ready to offer even a cup of water to one who is thirsty. Jesus loves us and expects us to love others. He welcomes us and so we welcome others, not for their sake but for ours. This is what Jesus calls us to be - a welcoming, hospitable community.

There is a wise saying about being made welcome: **“Hospitality turns strangers into friends.”**

How welcoming are our congregations? How do we go about offering hospitality to someone who has never been in our church before or has only come occasionally? Think about what happens on a normal Sunday morning. Do we welcome people warmly? Do the people on door duty say hello to everyone? Does the elder always seek to find out the name of the visitors, find out where they are from and invite them to come to morning tea afterwards? Do the people in the seat next to the visitors say hello or do they ignore them? If the visitors look a bit lost in the service, do we help them find the right book or place in the service?

If someone brings a noisy baby or toddler, do we glare at the parents or do we try to encourage them with our looks and comments, and try to smile at the baby and the parents and help wherever possible to make them feel welcome. Do we make sure children have pencil and textas and sheets to draw on?

Do we take time to seek out the visitors after church and talk to them? Do we invite them to come with us to morning tea? Do we offer them a drink there? Do we include them in the conversation and introduce them to others? I’m confident that you do at least some of these things well, but we need to ensure that we do all of them well when we are worshipping together again, all of the time, in order to be truly welcoming and hospitable.

But at the moment, of course, things aren’t normal. During COVID-19, hospitality is not easy - we’re isolated, unable to go out much. We’re focussed on looking after ourselves and those close to us.

How do we share hospitality in this time of restrictions? We can keep in touch by phone. We can make care packages for our church family and neighbours. Some of us have prepared and shared - Easter eggs, baked goods, care packages, and other small gifts. And some have conscientiously delivered Talking Points week by week. These are small acts of kindness, which are very much appreciated.

I invite you to use your imagination. What simple acts of faith, small acts of kindness can you do right now? Maybe it is only phoning someone you haven't seen for a while. Maybe it is leaving some home-cooked biscuits outside someone's door. Or taking them a bunch of flowers or a few vegetable seedlings. Or doing some shopping for someone who is homebound. Or offering transport to someone who doesn't drive to get them to appointments. Or checking on a neighbour to make sure they are OK. Or organising to visit someone who is in a nursing home who might well be struggling with isolation.

For in calling us to be hospitable, Jesus is asking us to imitate God's welcome, God's love and God's hospitality.

God welcomes each one of us into the family of God through baptism, through water. This is made possible by the great love Jesus had for humanity, such a great love that he was even prepared to lay down his life for us. In baptism we use water, the same water that we are called to offer in basic hospitality. The Church uses water in baptism as a symbol of cleansing us free of sin, of cleaning us of anything that will separate us from the love and forgiveness of God. Water in baptism is symbol of God's great love for us. It is a symbol of love and welcome.

In response to this great love of God for us, we are called to live each day sharing God's love. Jesus loves us and calls us to love others in simple, caring ways. This is what Jesus invites us to be - people who use their imagination to offer small acts of kindness at this challenging time.

May we keep on doing this, doing little acts of kindness, learning to welcome each other; learning to care for Jesus' little ones, those who struggle with life. May we do this in always in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

