

Before reading Sue's Sermon, you may wish to read the bible readings set for that Sunday, although if you are pushed for time, Sue does quote the section on which she preached. You can find the translation we most often use, the New Revised Standard Version, at <https://bible.oremus.org/> or a wide range of translations at <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Jeremiah 28:5-9 & Matthew 10:40-end

“In this morning's gospel reading we have reached a key point in the training received by his disciples at the hands of Jesus. In the run up to this morning's passage Jesus has been performing miracles and telling parables in front of them. Then in verses 5 to 15 of Matthew chapter 10 Jesus gave the disciples the opportunity to have a go at what we might today call mission for themselves, giving them clear instructions to follow about the way to do things.

After that there was more general instruction about some of the hardships and troubles they might expect to encounter followed by a reminder of Jesus' purpose here on earth before we get to this morning's passage, after which he returns to the job in hand, teaching and proclaiming his message in the cities.

Let me remind you of what Jesus said in our gospel reading:-

⁴⁰ ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ 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 a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² 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.'

There are three things that I would like to explore:-

1. The nature of welcome;
2. The role of a prophet;
3. The nature of the rewards mentioned in the passage.

Firstly, the nature of welcome. In our world today, as Christians, we now walk in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his message of God's love to those who either have not heard it before or who need to hear it, so it is possibly a natural assumption to think that the person being welcomed is going to be us, as we do Jesus' work. That means that we actually need to be doing that work in order to be welcomed.

However, we could, and should, also be the people who are welcoming those sent to deliver God's message because we all, even the cleverest of us, need to be open to hearing God's word. The Message translation of this passage states that 'accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger'. Learning to accept God's help or message is an important, and sometimes difficult, lesson to learn in a world that prides itself on being self-made but such an important one.

Did you notice that a key word used in our reading is 'welcome'. It is not 'receive' or 'hear'; those words are too passive, too formal perhaps. Just imagine for a moment. When you meet someone in a formal situation, possibly something like a church service, you might greet them with a polite 'how do you do?' and possibly extend a hand for a handshake; actions we might consider

to be closed. Our hand might reach across our bodies as we instinctively protect ourselves from something we might be unsure about.

When we welcome someone, we are more likely to open our arms in greeting, hug them perhaps, accepting them and what they bring or signify wholeheartedly, eager to hear what they have to say to us and to take it to heart. This morning you could all simply hear what I have to say, perhaps even letting it go in one ear and out of the other without ever engaging with it or thinking about it. However, I hope that instead you will welcome me and my words into your midst this morning and that you will take time to think about those words as you seek to find God and his message in them.

This leads me on to my second point – the role of a prophet. Over time the meaning of the word prophet has come to mean someone who can see into the future and say what is going to happen. That is not the role of a prophet in Biblical terms although the misunderstanding may have come because accepted prophets, people like Isaiah, Elijah or Jeremiah from our first reading, were people who delivered messages from God, usually about the need to change peoples' behaviour. Biblical prophets didn't see what was going to happen in the way that a fortune teller might look into their crystal ball or tealeaves and say that you are going to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger.

Just before I was licensed as a Lay Minister I had a meeting with Bishop David (Bishop Dagmar's predecessor in case you didn't know him) and he asked me lots of questions, which I thought I answered with my team-player hat on. I was wrong. He looked at

me thoughtfully and said 'Has it ever occurred to you that you are a prophet? Every answer you have given to my questions talks about changing the world.' And you see, that is what a prophet really does – they change the world.

It strikes me that life can become difficult when prophets are around, both for the prophet and those around them. Sometimes it can be difficult persuading people that change is needed and sometimes prophets can struggle (think perhaps of Jeremiah from last week's reading, John the Baptist and the apostle Paul and the things they went through). It can also be difficult for the people the prophets are trying to persuade to change, particularly when their lives are not going to be as comfortable and easy as they might be used to.

Change is hard. It challenges us. It makes us do things differently which might cause the eyes of those around us being challenged to open wide. But change is necessary, particularly in a world where we may consume too much and lose sight of the needs of our neighbour particularly the neighbour who doesn't necessarily look like us.

So that leads us on to point three, the nature of the rewards mentioned in the passage. What do we imagine the reward might be for a prophet? Ultimately it is the closeness to God which comes from doing the things he wants done, the promise of an eternal life lived with him. It is the grace that comes from learning to be more like him as we walk the path of life in our little world.

The passage says that we will be rewarded for doing something as simple as giving someone a cup of cold water in the name of a

disciple, which makes me think about the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4 of John's gospel. I don't want to go into all of the detail because this is not the passage for this morning, but I will remind you that Jesus was hot and alone having sent the disciples to find food. He sat by a well and when a woman came to get water at what was the hottest point of the day he asked her for a drink, which she willingly gave him. This simple exchange tells us that she was a bit of an outcast, seeking to avoid people yet Jesus began to talk to her about the living water that he could offer her. He should not have been talking to her for all sorts of reasons, but he did it anyway. So her reward for giving someone a drink of cold water, was a conversation with the Son of God offering her the gift of eternal life with him. That is the story in a nutshell – read John chapter 4 if you want to find out more.

Our passage from Matthew's gospel states that God's rewards are available for two types of people. The first is the prophet or righteous person who lives out their lives in the light of God, serving those around them. That seems simple and makes sense. However, the second type of person is the one who welcomes those people who are living out their lives in the light of God, accepting them and what they bring or signify wholeheartedly.

It is by the simple action of turning our backs on God's prophets and the people living righteous lives and by not welcoming them that we lose the wonderful, priceless rewards that God offers and there are plenty of stories of such things happening in the Bible if you wish to look for them.

May God be with you today. Amen.”