

# Whom soever you welcome

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2026 –Matthew 10:40-42)

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A woman who had never spoken and no one really knew, stood up in church, took the baton from the man doing the children's talk (he had invited anyone to have a go) and began to conduct the music. She belonged to a group at the church which catered for members of the local community from local boarding houses who had various levels of disability. In that moment she felt so welcome by the church community that she was able to rid herself of all her inhibitions and allow herself to be led by the music, she could do nothing but participate in what was happening. In that moment she truly belonged to the community.

A young boy with significant sight problems, and a mild intellectual disability was busy using a carpet sweeper to clean up the carpet in the church after morning tea. He had arrived at the church with his single mother who had addiction problems. Many took him into their hearts, helped clothe him, took him to the zoo or on holidays and even gave him a birthday party one year. Slowly he began to interact with people at the church, and they accepted his eccentricities, his quirkiness and loved him. On this occasion he was asking people to move out of his way so he could clean, proudly announcing to all - we have to make sure OUR church is clean - he finally knew he belonged.

A teenager stands on the footpath hurling his belongings at me. I was standing at the front door of the house he had lived in for a few weeks whilst he served out his juvenile detention sentence. He was unable to accept that he needed to go back into the Youth Training Centre for the last night of that sentence (as the law required). He had felt so welcome in our place (I shared with 3 other people) that he couldn't bear to go back to prison even if only for one night. He had found somewhere he felt he belonged.

On Wednesday a dishevelled older man was pacing up down the church verandah, muttering incoherently as he went. He was clearly homeless, and I suspected had been sleeping there over previous nights. I asked if he had, but he couldn't really tell me if he had or not. He said he would just sit there for a few minutes whilst he waited for a friend. I said that was fine and went back inside to see what I could offer him to make him more comfortable. I found a can of drink and gave it to him on my way out.

I offer you these four stories as examples of simple practical ways of putting into practice that which Jesus in today's readings is asking from his followers.

*Jesus says - and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple (Matthew 10:42b)*

In our gospel reading from Matthew this morning we are invited to welcome the messengers of God, be they prophets, righteous ones or little ones. To do so is to welcome God.

Welcome and hospitality was vital in Matthew's community. To not offer hospitality would have been a serious faux pas in that society. Hospitality or offering a welcome was not easy - it was not just a cup of tea and a handshake. It involved refreshment, the washing of feet and anointing with oil. Matthew's gospel details a time of

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persecution and to show hospitality to a follower of Jesus was risky. It was risky because you would have shown yourself to be in solidarity with those that were outcast and rejected by most of society. It was risky to offer welcome to such people as you too would most likely become an 'outsider' too.

Remember our story of Abraham and Sarah from a couple of weeks ago, it was in the welcoming of strangers that they welcomed God and received the promise of a child.

Who are the little ones to whom we should offer a cup of water?

Who are the strangers in our midst whom we must welcome? Who in our midst might just have something to say to us about God?

It seems to me that the message of God is brought to us by the most unexpected people. People on the margins - refugees, mentally ill, offenders, gays, indigenous Australians, in my experience, have often been the ones who have taught me about love and grace and kindness. Unfortunately, it is often these very people we have excluded from our life together - Jesus calls us to welcome such as these into our midst.

One group of the 'little ones' we need to think about welcoming into our space, really welcoming, helping them feel like they belong is those who line up for food each week on Wednesdays. They are a motely crew - from many different cultural groups - Vietnamese, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, African, Chinese, Filipino, Aussie, Islanders. They are young and old, students and pensioners, men and women, transgender, sometimes even children. They live in boarding houses, on the streets, share houses. Some have no shoes or no teeth, some have therapy dogs with them. Some have fled domestic violence or battle addictions of all kinds.

All yearn to belong. We give them some meat and bread and a drink or two. We offer them some warmth in the Green Room for a short time and give them a hot cuppa. They yearn for relationships, for someone to really listen. How can we truly welcome them not just onto the property but into our community?

This is an enormous challenge for a little church like us, but these are 'the little ones' of whom Jesus speaks and they are literally on our doorstep. If we can do this then I think our reward will be a church that starts to blossom and the kingdom of God beginning to flourish.

Let me conclude with a prayer from The Church of Scotland:

May God bless us with encounters  
That turn strangers into neighbours,  
That turn fear into friendships,  
That turn hatred into hospitality,  
That turn pain into peace.  
Amen. *(From 'The Church of Scotland')*