

Final Service at St Mary's – Eph 3:14-21, Mt 10:40-42

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

I have to say that when I first walked through the doors of St Mary's Church nearly 15 years ago, I never expected to be preaching for a first time, let alone a last; but well, by the grace of God, here I am!

When we first walked through the church doors many years ago, we were made welcome. After our first service, several people spoke to us, including memorably one asking: 'Have you come to have your banns read?' I brandished my two-week-old wedding ring and said that, "no, we are just visiting". And yes, I remember who asked that, and no, I'm not going to tell you who it was! That welcome opened conversation and drew us back for a second visit, where I was invited to play the piano with the Open Door musicians. From a young age, I'd wanted to play the piano in church, so I knew from that moment that this was where God wanted us to be... and the rest as they say is history.

I wonder if you can think of a time when you have felt welcome? Maybe at church, or maybe elsewhere? What was it that made you feel welcome?

In our welcome to St Mary's, people showed an interest in us and in who we were. That made us feel a part of things. We were invited in and invited to be involved, not just on that first visit, but over the years that we've been here. Welcome matters. Welcome is important.

In our gospel reading Jesus says that when we welcome others, we are welcoming God. Each person made in His image, in whom we see Him. It is easy to welcome those who are like us, perhaps even those who have

something to offer. But the challenge comes when we strive to extend that welcome to those who don't fit, that seem 'other', that aren't like us. The ones we might naturally avoid in the street, the people on their own in the playground; those who speak differently, act differently or just don't seem our kind of people. Genuinely welcoming others recognises them for who they are and not who we think they ought to be. It meets others where they are and accepts them, rather than places our own prejudices on them. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, says that as all people are made in God's image, we 'stand before holy ground when [we] encounter another person', owing them the reverence that we show to God.¹ The person sitting next to you today, the people you will encounter in your week – each one made in God's image and loved by Him. In welcoming others, we are welcoming God.

Jesus also shows us that welcome does not need to be big or extravagant. 'Whoever gives even a cup of cold water...' (Mt 10:42). In Jesus' time that was the smallest act of hospitality one would be expected to offer a visitor. Now, in a country with cold water on tap, it probably seems insignificant for us to offer a cup of water; but Jesus, He sees the seemingly insignificant and values it. The little things we do, sometimes out of sight of others, offer welcome. In our church, there are many who serve in that way, not often acknowledged or noticed, but always valued. Those of you who do likewise in your homes, in your schools, in your workplaces – those little acts of care and kindness, that extend welcome far beyond our church walls and into our community. We might not always feel valued for the things we do, but

¹ Rowan Williams, Being Disciples p.64

God sees and knows, and He values even the smallest act of welcome that you offer to another.

And of course, we don't offer this welcome alone, but through the power of Christ's spirit at work and His love overflowing from us. In our New Testament reading this morning - Paul's eloquent prayer for the Ephesian church - he writes to remind them of how big God's love is for each one of us. For those of you who have ever had the joy of attending Refresh, our toddler group, you'll know how much we all love singing about it in the song 'Jesus' love is very wonderful' – "so high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get round it, oh wonderful love!"

Paul says in his prayer: 'I pray that... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love' (Eph 3:16-17). Rooted and grounded in love. For a tree or plant, roots sustain. They nourish. They seek out what the tree needs to grow. They stabilise. They keep the plant upright even through the biggest storm. All of these things can be said of Christ's love for us. It sustains and nourishes us. It helps us to flourish. It keeps us rooted through the storms of life, and in doing so enables us to welcome others into the stability of that love too.

The welcome in this church community has been a joy to receive. It helps us to become rooted and grounded in love, and to grow in knowing and understanding the vastness of Christ's love for each and every one of us. Going out, flourishing in that love, I go ready to share the wonder and joy of God's love with those I will minister with and to, not in my own strength but through the power of Christ's spirit at work. A real welcome is a gift that this church can continue to offer to all those who walk through our doors, for

the first time or the millionth time; to each other, to help each one of us grow and flourish in God's love.

It is my prayer today that each of you would know the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for you and being rooted and grounded in that love you would go out to welcome all those you encounter into Christ's love.

'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.' (Eph 3:20-21). Amen