

## Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

There is a motif of welcome and hospitality in today's readings and it is easy to see how it implies a form of relationship between host and guest. This comes out quite strongly in the Hebrew of the ancient Middle East where hospitality was a highly respected virtue. Words for welcome contain the notion of blessing, and the essence of blessing is passing on goodness to another. We could say, in other words, that when we bless, we communicate good vibes, good wishes and something of ourselves.

Traditional Hebrew has expressions of welcome like *barukh haba* (a blessing on your coming), *barukh leshalom* (a blessing of peace). The Eastern hug or touch of welcome is a gesture of passing on well-being to a guest or visitor and this involves a meeting of spirits.

**2 Kings 4:8-11; 14-16** Elisha (*El* = God; *yasha* = salvation) is passing through Shunem, a town in northern Israel, and is invited by a woman of standing to dine at her house. She suspects he is a holy man and she and her husband build a room to enable Elisha to be more comfortable when he comes to Shunem. As an aside, Elisha is never referred to in the stories as a prophet, simply 'man of God'. He stays there with Gehazi his servant whenever he is in the region. As a 'thank you' Elisha speaks to the woman and predicts that in a year's time she will have given birth to a son.

Here is a woman showing hospitality to a holy man, showing spiritual awareness to see God's presence in the person and events surrounding Elisha. This is authentic generosity, given freely without the expectation of a reward. Her recognition of the divine Presence gives us a model of mindfulness.

**Psalm 89** This psalm sings the praises of a king in Israel who rules with justice in the name of the Lord. It is almost impossible to work out if the psalmist has any particular historical king of Israel in mind. Josiah may well qualify (c. 640-609 BCE). How good is God to choose a king who rules as a faithful shepherd of his people.

Applying this kingly theme to Jesus the first Jewish Christians saw him as 'the son of David', that is, a messianic king, royal and glorious, who, as a chosen instrument of God, would bring about human renewal and social reformation

**Romans 6:3-4, 8-11** Paul is describing Christian initiation as a rite of passage from one state of being to another. He uses the idea of being one with Christ in his death and then rising with him to a new life, with a new identity as a follower of Jesus Christ. We could imagine Paul's reference having a tangible impact when we consider the process of baptism in those early Christian decades. The candidate walked into the bath of baptism after throwing off their clothes and emerged to be wrapped in the white robe of the neophyte. Throwing off their clothes symbolised casting off their old life and embracing the new life of grace as a Christian. This Christian style of baptism was an adaptation of the Jewish practice of ritual purification by full immersion in a special bath (*mikveh*).

Bearing in mind that the Greek verb *baptizō* means immerse or duck, it is quite likely that full bodily immersion could have been seen as a symbol of burial – and in Paul's language burial with Christ, followed by being cleansed and rising to a new life.

Paul's lesson to the Romans is that they are dead to the old life, when they were ignorant of Christ, and are now living the new life according to the example and teachings of Jesus Christ.

**Matthew 10:37-42** At first glance these verses could be quite troubling to most readers. It looks as if Jesus is putting loyalty to him above all other considerations. In fact, his words are signalling the hierarchy of loyalties.

The language of the first part of today's extract is taken directly from the prophet Micah (7:6) who was pretty exasperated with the upper crust of his day who were caught up in self-indulgence, ripping off the poor and grabbing money at every turn in the road. The prophet railed against the disappearance of family loyalties, a sign that traditional values had gone to the dogs.

Jesus is saying that to prefer family members over him makes a person unsuitable to be a disciple. Commitment to him cannot be half-hearted. This would have particular impact in the first century when a decision to follow Jesus or embrace Christianity would conceivably cause ructions in a Jewish or

Roman family. Parents and siblings could see a convert to Christianity as a traitor to the family religious tradition and an insult to the religion of their ancestors.

Jesus goes on to say that anyone who welcomes one of his agents is welcoming Christ himself. This has the ring of Middle Eastern legal and social convention where an appointed agent carries the full authority of the one who sent him. An ambassador, for example, might state his terms or message and would customarily add, 'In this, my king and I are one.' Jesus used a similar statement in his Good Shepherd discourse when he said, 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30 and again in John 17:11 and 22).

Jesus then turns to highlight 'the little ones' who are the insignificant ones in society, and declares that the most trivial gift to the most unimportant disciples of his will not go unrewarded. Here again is that reversal of values that Jesus so often underlines as the ideal way to go. Those who are insignificant in human estimation may well be important and dearly loved in God's eyes.

**Today's gospel speaks to a change that recognises the radical nature of Christ's call.**

This easily overlooked statement of Jesus needs our attention, 'Anyone who welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet will have a prophet's reward.' How do we recognise the prophets of today? Among the standard criteria are these: the prophets will disturb our comfort and our conventions; they will stand for justice and goodness and practise what they preach; they will be roundly criticised and condemned by those who have power, authority and entitlement to protect; they will be opposed by the self-righteous who, blind to the flaws in their reasoning, defend the status quo in the name of tradition.

The sad reality is the institutional church has a track record of persecuting its poets, mystics and prophets, mainly because these charismatic figures don't lie down when told. They become grit in the cogs and put at risk the smooth running of the autocratic machine. Strangely enough, this is exactly what Jesus did, and he, too, was arrested and executed. We desperately need to really listen to our prophets.



It is only the very stupidest who cannot change.

Confucius

If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.

Lao-Tzu



Sister Magdalene had spent the whole period of Religious Education telling her class about repentance. At the end she asked the class,

'What do we have to do first before we can obtain forgiveness of our sins?'

Young Michael O'Shea was the first to answer.

'Sin.'

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