

## Thought for the Day – Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020 – Philip Rice

### Matthew 10.40-42

40 'Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. 42 And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.'

Thanks be to God.

This notice appeared on the door of a church in Leigh some years ago. I have made a couple of minor changes regarding location:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, gay, confused, filthy rich, comfortable, or dirt poor. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rake or could afford to lose a few pounds. You're welcome if you are Old Desborough, New Desborough, Not Desborough, or just passing by.

We welcome you if you can sing like Pavarotti or can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're 'just browsing', just woke up or just got out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury, or haven't been to church since little Jack's christening.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers, who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit mums, football dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or if you don't like 'organised religion'. We've been there too.

If you blew all your money on the horses, you're welcome here. We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost on Dunkirk Avenue and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, workers and doubters, bleeding hearts . . . . . and you.

One of the things my wife has done during the lockdown is to sign up to the Imperial College Coronavirus App. This is a research app from the college's Centre for Global Infectious Disease, which tracks and analyses the spread of the virus. Carolyn has signed up on behalf of herself and me. She's input information about our ages and our general health and well-being, and each day she updates it with any changes. So every day, she asks me the same question: "Are you feeling normal today?" And every day, I give her the same response: "Certainly not!"

I think I've always had an inbuilt resistance to being normal. Well, good gracious, if I'm normal, how would that make you feel?

What is 'normal', anyway? And why would I want to be normal?

Being 'normal' doesn't mean that everyone has to be the same, of course – just as long as you're not 'odd'. And, of course, there are people who are 'a bit odd' and some who are 'very odd indeed' and we wouldn't want to have anything to do with them. Would we?

Being Christian is a bit odd. In some circles, if you say you're a Christian, people might say "really?" It's not the norm, but actually, I find that most people, while they might think it's a bit odd, they respect you and actually it makes them think. Because most people who never go near Church haven't really thought about it because it's not the norm, and most people just go with the flow because they do want to be normal. They don't want people to think they're 'a bit odd'.

So, do you want to be 'normal' or 'a bit odd'?

The short passage we read from Matthew's Gospel is the last part of Jesus' teaching to his disciples, as they prepare to go out and proclaim the coming of the kingdom (10.5). And as Jesus sent them out, these words identify them and their mission with their Lord and his mission; "Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me" (v. 40). And, he says, anyone who welcomes them for who and what they are, will be rewarded accordingly (v. 41). So there's an onus on those who hear the message to respond appropriately. How do we respond?

This passage isn't so much about how we welcome others, important as that is, but about how we welcome those who bring the message of Good News and how we are welcomed when we take the Good News to others. Are we ready to welcome the message of hope that Jesus sends to us, or do we slam the door and go back to being normal.

To those who listened to Jesus, his message must often have seemed absurd, because it was a message of inclusivity. It seemed to go against everything they understood about God. The Pharisees taught all sorts of rules about the way they should live and Jesus seemed to contradict all that.

You didn't, for example, see the big-wigs from the temple visiting sinners in their homes. Visiting a sinner would make them unclean. They wouldn't touch or even go near anyone who was unclean, or allow an unclean people to touch them.

You didn't see them responding to need with a personal visit, following a call for help by someone whose daughter had died – death was also unclean. Yet that's exactly what Jesus did in one fairly typical day. He was enjoying a meal in the home of Levi, the tax collector, a sinner, when he was summoned to the home of one of the rulers, whose daughter had died.

He set off and, on his way, the hem of his garment was touched by a woman who'd suffered from haemorrhaging for 12 years. One of the horrors of this woman's disease was that it rendered her unclean – check out Leviticus 15, where there's a whole section on it. This, of course, meant she was effectively an outcast, as far as the Pharisees were concerned. There was no inclusivity there. The Pharisees conducted their religion on the basis of rules. Jesus, on the other hand, was driven by compassion and offers a different vision of God. Not an authoritarian God who demands adherence to rules, regardless of individual needs, but a God of compassion who calls all of us to live lives of compassion.

We currently have strict rules about who we can and cannot touch and you can't go in a shop without being offered hand-sanitiser. As far as I'm aware, the Pharisees' hand-washing rituals didn't include singing 'Happy Birthday', but the main difference is that our rules are precautions to protect others, as well as ourselves, and it's in respect of a real threat. And while these restrictions are in place, we continue to seek out ways of supporting the vulnerable and, even if we have to wear PPE we'll do whatever is necessary to help.

As Messiah, Son of God, Jesus might have been expected to set up his headquarters in the Temple and summon people to kneel at his feet. Instead, he washed the feet of his disciples. He led by example – always reaching out to people. And not just people who were part of the establishment, but all people & especially those in need – the poor, the sick, the outcast and the sinner.

We can live a conventional worldly life, away from any controversy, or He offers us a life doing what often seems at odds with the ways of the world – doing things differently; welcoming those the world doesn't welcome; welcoming each person as if they are Christ. It's a life built on love – where the choices we make are driven by love for others not ourselves.

Look around you. Look at the news of what's going on here in the UK and around the world. Which is more absurd? Following Jesus, or following the ways of the world. God calls us to live a different way, with different values.

That long list of people welcomed by that church in Leigh are just some of the people welcomed by Jesus into his love, and he calls us to take his love to all who need it; to be a welcoming church for all people, regardless of creed or colour or ethnicity, or any other category you care to mention, because all are children of God. That's how different he wants us to be, because the Kingdom of God is a topsy-turvy kingdom, where the last shall be first and the poor shall be rich.

Or would you rather be normal? Amen.

*More like you, Jesus, more like you  
fill my heart with your desire to make me more like you.  
More like you, Jesus, more like you  
touch my lips with holy fire and make me more like you.*

Lord, you are my mercy, Lord, you are my grace,  
all my deepest sins have forever been erased.  
Draw me in your presence, lead me in your ways,        |  
I long to bring you glory in righteousness and praise.

*More like you . . .*

Lord, you are compassion, and never ending love,  
for you have redeemed me by your precious blood.  
Create in me a clean heart, a spirit that is new,  
the joy of my salvation is only found in you.

*More like you . . .*

*Words & music: Scott Wesley Brown  
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