

28/5/20 Pott Shrigley virtual service

Text: Matthew 10: 40-42

'Even a cup of cold water.'

There's a long Christian tradition, associated particularly with the Celtic church, of drawing out a word or phrase that has immediately captured our attention from a Gospel passage.

One which has instant significance and associations for us.

One with potential for further exploration.

One which we could meditate on and then discuss.

In the Middle Ages this form of Bible study was called 'Lectio Divina'.

In today's gospel reading from Matthew Jesus talks about 'cups of cold water' and this is the image I'd like to focus on now.

Cups of cold water don't sound very exciting, do they? They suggest water out of the tap when we're in a hurry for a drink and don't have anything else available.

Most of us would probably prefer a cup of coffee or tea.

Cups of cold water here in England are definitely not the drink of choice.

They have negative associations with 'pouring cold water' on someone's enthusiasms.

But in hot countries of course things are different.

A traveller in dusty Palestine would appreciate a cup of cold water – a treat; a sign of reception, and expression of welcome.

A cool drink. Not just water – as it appears in Mark’s gospel – but, according to Matthew, a cup of cold water.

The offering of cold water is a vital part of social relationships in a parched landscape.

To give a cup of cold water is a symbol of meeting another person’s essential need. It’s a pure gift, a meaningful expression of hospitality and a way of embracing another disciple in your home or community.

Undoubtedly Jesus (and later Matthew) hoped that such hospitality offered to one of Jesus ‘little ones’ wouldn’t stop with a cup of water. They would’ve hoped that a more extensive welcome might be offered.

Remember – this was pre-Travelodge days.

But then, as now, just providing water might speak volumes about the person offering the drink.

In those days, it might have included an extra trip to the well to get a ‘cold’ cup of water, as opposed to offering a drink from a jug that had been sitting out for hours or even days – anything but fresh. The effort required of this was, in itself, a caring gesture.

When Matthew’s Jesus says that the cup of cold water should be given to ‘one of these little ones’ he’s referring to the least of Jesus’ followers – not, in this context, just to children.

He’s talking about followers who don’t have positions of leadership or influence.

He's talking about those for whom he cares deeply and of whom he is particularly protective.

Those who find themselves on the margins of society – all who are oppressed, the physically challenged, the hungry, the refugee, those who are living below the poverty line, the orphaned, the unemployed and those of a different race and, though it wasn't said in this way then, of colour. The list, as we all know is endless.

The image of 'the cup of water' is about the importance of hospitality to all, and especially to those who are speaking and working as labourers in God's own harvest. At the end of Chapter 9 Matthew has already talked about those who Jesus sent out on their first mission into God's harvest field.

How we treat God's workers (and not just those we refer to as pastors and missionaries), how we treat any of God's disciples and followers, indicates how we welcome Jesus ourselves.

And, of course, that also means how we welcome God, the One who sent his Son, Jesus.

Matthew runs through various categories of people for whom a special welcome should be reserved.

He begins with the welcoming of a prophet, then a righteous or godly person, then finally Jesus' 'little ones.'

Remember what Jesus says in Mark 9:37: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Earlier in today's chapter Jesus instructs his disciples to take note of the hospitality offered, both by individuals and the community, on entering a village to carry out their mission. This will indicate whether the people are accepting or rejecting Jesus himself.

How do we shape up in all of this?

Are we offering enough cups of cold water both individually and as a community?

People are certainly responding so generously in whatever ways are possible at the moment. I'm thinking, for example, of Foodbanks and keeping an eye out for our neighbours. Holding them in our prayers.

Acts of hospitality can be offered by anyone – but there is special significance when they are offered as part of our faith response.

And amongst those who give in faith it's often those who have little of this world's wealth and pleasures who are the most hospitable. There's something beautiful in such hospitality, even when it might make us feel uncomfortable.

After all, only a cup of cold water is necessary.

But a cup of cold water, as refreshing as it may be, only meets an immediate need.

True welcome means that we should help Jesus' 'little ones' to build a road to the water supply.

We should support these 'little ones' in their discipleship.

We should be open to new ideas and expressions of faith from all in our church community and especially those who are new to it.

We should recognise that the cup of cold water – or perhaps the cup of tea or coffee – is just the start, the trigger.

Jesus tells us that anyone who serves others, even if it's only giving a cup of cold water, will be blessed and rewarded.

No matter how we say it, how we treat each other translates into how we see Jesus and how we see God.

That should give us pause ... even a cup of cold water reminds us how we meet Christ in each other and the way in which God showers his grace upon us.

AMEN