

"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

Last week the Lord prepared us to face rejection for being Christians. This week in the last words of the same chapter he tells us it isn't all bad, some people will receive us, welcome us and our message, and he encourages us to receive each other as his disciples and promises to bless us as we do that.

Last Sunday after preaching about being prepared to be rejected for being Christians my wife and I got out of the car at home and a young neighbour yelled out across the street to "How did church go?". Then she crossed the road and told us about a death in the family and how they were finding it hard to deal with it and that she had thought about knocking on our door for some spiritual guidance. On Friday another neighbour came over to tell us about a death in their family and asked us to do something small to help out.

"Whoever receives you receives me" Jesus said.

Sometimes we feel irrelevant, of no consequence and having little standing in the community as Christians. Then sometimes people look to us and seek us out in hard times because they sense we have something, or someone that holds things together when life is threatening or falling apart for them. And Jesus was there in both conversations standing behind us and speaking through us. When people are looking for God and looking for him in us it is a wonderful privilege and makes all the discomfort, rejection and crap we sometimes have to put up with as Christians worthwhile.

And the place where we can most expect to be received and welcomed as Christ's disciples is right here, when we come together in worship. Here in church Jesus calls the rest of us to receive you. And he calls you to receive us. He calls us to receive each other as a gift from God, receive each other as we would receive Jesus himself, because he says: "Whoever receives you receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me". 6 times in three verses the word "receive" is mentioned. Being a Christian is largely about receiving - God's gift of grace to us in Christ, and people because of Christ.

How many of you welcomed someone, greeted them, smiled at them or said hello to them when you came to Church this morning? When you welcomed and received your fellow Christians today you were welcoming Christ and behind him God the Father! Some Churches do that in church, a time where everyone has to get up and say hello to someone, we even went to one church on holidays where everyone was told to get up and hug everyone else. A bit much for us! There are other ways to receive each other!

Sometimes we hang back and wait for others to welcome and receive and acknowledge us. We judge other churches and our own on the basis of how well they do that to us, but there comes a point where we need to become the welcomer, the acknowledger, the recogniser, the receiver of each other. And as we do that we acknowledge, welcome, receive, and serve Jesus himself, whether we know the person or not. We all share responsibility for receiving each other on any given day, not just our Pastoral Carers and ushers on duty or "Eric everywhere" our unofficial welcomer! And especially we share together the responsibility of welcoming and receiving and serving those who are new or visiting. That visitor is Christ. And we are Christ to them. That's how we are to see them and hopefully they will experience us.

Not only are you to receive each other but you are also to receive me as your pastor. **"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward"**. A prophet here is a person who speaks the word of God, the words of Jesus. I guess that's what I do for you when I speak words of forgiveness to you, when I preach these words to you and when I hand you the bread and wine to you at communion. When you listen and receive these words and the meal in faith you receive Christ who is behind them and in them, his forgiveness, his words, his body and blood. And when you welcome and receive what I offer you in the name of Christ you are blessed and rewarded along with me, equally with me. Jesus says **"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward"**. What you get out of church as you receive me and my words is no less than what I get out of it - the grace of God, the forgiving love of God and the promises and presence of God.

And when you recognise each other as Christians, that we are all fallible and sinful and yet all loved and died for by the same Jesus, we also remember we are all heading for heaven together, the same reward, the reward won by Jesus when he died for all of us. **"anyone who receives a righteous person because**

they are righteous will receive a righteous person's reward". We share in God's blessings together now and in eternity as we recognise and receive each other.

Not only are we to receive prophets and "righteous people" as if they were Christ, (today we would say pastors and fellow Christians, especially leaders and examples of faith), but even the "little ones", those we might think of as less important, less impressive, and even less holy or Christian in some way! People who are a pain and a burden, who we don't think can give us anything. When we neglect them in the church we neglect Jesus and when we receive them and serve them we receive and serve Jesus himself and we are just as blessed as if we served him or a pastor or fine upstanding leader in the church! **"if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."**

Who are the "little ones" the smaller ones, the lesser ones to you? Who is on the fringe, who could easily be left out here, who goes unnoticed and unappreciated here? And how can you receive them too as if they were Jesus? Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book "Life Together" says "The exclusion of the weak, insignificant, seemingly useless people from the Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ!"

You don't have to do something large or heroic or beyond your gifts to receive and welcome someone else in to your life or this fellowship of faith. It can be as small as a cup of cold water. In fact small gestures at the right time can go a long way. Watching the neighbour's house while they were all away at the funeral on Friday was a small thing but it said a lot to them as they had been broken into last year. I spoke to a Christian in a school this week who said they were surprised to learn how the small things they did were so well received and went such a long way and were often recognised by those not in the faith as coming from our faith even if we are not conscious of it! A cup of cold water, a few words, they might seem so small and insignificant, but Jesus says they are valued as much as bigger things by God and are done to him.

I visited a lady on Friday who had suffered a stroke. When you visit isolated Christians in hospital you represent all of us and you represent Christ himself. That's how they often see it. When I pulled out a tract to share a word of God she started crying. That's not uncommon but she said to me that morning a doctor had come to see her and noticed a Christian tract left on her tray by a chaplain. He was a Christian too and asked if he could take it and give it to another patient which she was happy to do. She was crying because she was thankful to be recognised by the doctor not just as a patient but as a Christian in a very foreign environment and that she could actually do something however small to bless another patient's life by giving away her tract even though she couldn't move or speak well. They were both rewarded.

Jesus talks about rewards. We often want to know what's in it for us if we are to do things. What's in it for us as we receive each other and those seeking God when we love them? When we think reward we think payment, getting what we deserve or are owed. The reward Jesus talks about is not something we earn by the way we receive and welcome and serve people, it is rather the gift of his blessing as we respond to his welcome of us by welcoming and receiving others. Those blessings and "rewards" can be many and varied. And in the greatest sense we have already been "rewarded" by Jesus, when we receive his "free gift" of salvation that the Romans passage talked about today. We did nothing to earn it but are blessed by it. In the same way when we receive and welcome another person and serve them both they and we are blessed, rewarded in some way, it's not about deserving but about enjoying a blessing and a gift we both equally receive because of Christ who stands behind us and is in us.

It is not easy to be a Christian out there today. Let's not make it any harder at church. Let's welcome and receive each other as God's gift every time we see a fellow Christian. Let's not neglect to receive the word of God from his preachers and teachers, and let's not neglect doing the little things that honour and acknowledge each other as if we were Christ who is hidden in each of us. And let's make sure we especially receive the person who looks to and receives us in any way. May our small and great gestures of welcome and love be a sign of Christ's presence for them.