

"Anyone who gives you a cup of cold water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward"

Today is "Lutheran Community Care" Sunday. Here at St Paul's we thank God that he has enabled us to provide food, a listening ear and cheap clothing and other basics to people in our community for over a decade. And together with congregations around the State we thank God today for 40 years of Lutheran Community Care across the state and now also in Alice Springs.

Caring for people in need, the vulnerable, the left out, and those unfairly treated is not optional for us as Christians. It is a basic expression of our faith. We have been hearing readings from the Apostle James this month who said: **"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes or daily food. If one of you says to him 'Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:16)** Jesus had just told his disciples that he would have to be betrayed and killed and then rise again if he was to save the world. Then he told them **"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35)**. He took a child and put the child in the middle of them and said **"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (v37)**.

Serving and extending welcome, hospitality and care to the smallest and least of people shows we understand the mind of Christ and have the heart of Christ and in doing it we are serving God himself!

"Anyone who gives you a cup of cold water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward" (v 41). In this verse Jesus reminds us that Community Care starts here, in the church between each other as people who bear the name of Christ, the name Christian, people who belong to Christ. If we can't look out for each other, especially the elderly, the child, the disabled, the different, and those going through hard times in here what does it say to people out there about our faith?

So the New Testament is full of **"one another"** passages, that call us to care for each other in all sorts of ways. "Love, honour, greet, serve, be devoted to, be kind and compassionate to, encourage, have fellowship with one another" are just a few examples of the "Community Care" that I meant to happen among us who recognize Christ in each other. James told us this morning to **"confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (5:16)**, especially when we are unwell.

But Community Care does not stay here! Not only do we see Christ in each other who belong to him in faith, we also see Christ in those outside the Christian community. Jesus extended that in Matt 25 to the lonely, the sick, the prisoner and the hungry, and said that when we offer them something as simple as a visit, some food, or a cup of cold water, we do it to him, to God himself.

Because we bear his name, because we know the heart and mind of Jesus, a heart of love and compassion and justice and care, we see him in those who don't yet believe as well! They are still precious to him, they too have been died for by Jesus. So how can we not serve them too. In fact it ought to become natural for us to want to make sure those outside the Christian Community are treated a least as well as those inside it as a witness

to Christ. That's why we are involved in food relief, the Op shop and services at Minda and Edward St, and the move to provide a part time counselor in Martin Luther house through Lutheran Community Care. It's why we together with congregations around the state support the 75 staff and 600 volunteers that offer 35 community programs around the state from food relief to refugee settlement to counseling services and mental health support groups and foster care all in the name of Christ. It's why we gave out free water to exhausted runners at the tram stop after the City-Bay last Sunday.

It's not about the size of the gift or action (some think we can't do much so we do nothing). To us a cup of water may be nothing, to a thirsty person it is everything. To those who come here a carton of long life milk, a bag of groceries, something actually fresh is everything. To the children who open these "shoe boxes of love", gifts that we might think are small and nothing will be received with wonder and joy. And to Jesus even a small gift to the smallest of people is an expression of your relationship with him and will be rewarded in some way.

While we are not all able to sit on the other side of the table on Mondays and Wednesdays and listen to the stories of marginalized people, and not all of us can physically hand them some food or sell or give them some clothing, we are all part of Community Care here at St Paul's. A tin of food, a gift of clothing, prayer and encouragement for our volunteers, providing facilities for our care and for our carers, it's all something we can be part of and see as an expression of love as those who claim to bear Christ's name and who see Christ in others.

The cost of a cup of cold water? In Jesus' time, there was no refrigeration and no way to make ice. The only way to get cold water was to make a special trip to a well, where the water would be chilled from being deep. So even a cup of cold water came with some cost, and inconvenience to the giver. There is always a cost to loving and serving in the name of Christ. To some that will mean time, others money, others using their energy and gifts and listening ears. While I was typing this sermon on Friday afternoon the phone rang and a man asked for food relief for himself and three other men. It was cold and raining outside and they lived at Morphettsville with no transport. I had a sermon to finish and people to see...but how could one refuse. The man barely thanked me and all I got was a wary hand that reached around the door and grabbed the food parcel. But so what? Could it have been Jesus on the other end of the phone, or the hand through the door testing me? There is always a cost for caring, a risk in caring. But the cost of community care is insignificant alongside the cost to our Lord who dies to save the whole community including us.

And the reward for caring? Sometimes we expect to earn a reward by doing a kind action and we forget that the biggest reward may lie in having the opportunity to be a kind person as an expression of who we are in Christ. Jesus didn't say the person who cares will be rewarded but that they "**won't lose**" their reward. It's like the reward is already there, you don't earn it by doing anything! However God may choose to reward our loving service as Christians in this life or the next is his business, and we know we certainly don't earn his favour by doing things. But he promises there will be blessing in all sorts of ways for giver and receiver of kindness' and Christian service.

Because we are "in Christ", carried by Christ, loved and forgiven by Christ, we can't help ourselves but to serve others, in the Christian community and outside it. That's how it is meant to work. We carry his name, we are Christians. That is reward, gift enough. In being who we are we certainly won't lose that gift, that blessing, that reward. In fact we confirm that we already appreciate the greatest gift of all, and that is Christ himself.