

Welcome welcome

Matt. 10:40-42

Genesis 22:1-14

*Welcome, welcome, mighty king!  
Welcome all who conquest bring!  
Welcome David, warlike boy,  
Author of our present joy!  
Saul, who hast thy thousands slain,  
Welcome to thy friends again!  
David his ten thousands slew,  
Ten thousand praises are his due!*

Handel's Oratorio Saul Scene 3 of Act 1 begins with this rousing chorus of Israelites. Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist, is setting the scene for all that is to follow. It is not difficult to imagine King Saul's reaction, dammed with faint praise.

Welcoming in Saul and David's day, and also in Jesus day, was much more significant than today. Travel and communications were slow and difficult so when travellers arrived they were welcomed not just for themselves but for the news they brought.

It is easy for us today with the internet, mobiles, SKYPE etc to assume that communication was always easy. But the changes of the last few years have been very dramatic and revolutionary. I left England for Canada 50 years ago next month. The letter was still the most significant personal communications medium, the last words from my parents as they said farewell to me was "write" and as a dutiful son I used to write every week to the family back "home" and continued to write regularly until the early 1990s when e-mail became widespread. Yes my parents did write to me as well, mainly my mother!!

In biblical times and for many centuries afterwards communications over any distance was restricted to the use of letters and envoys. Often the two were linked together as an "envoy" would bring a letter and then discuss the contents with the recipient before returning to the original sender. The

“envoy” was trusted by both parties so that a dialogue could take place over a distance. This would have been generally understood by the disciples – they were to be Jesus envoys.

The Plain English Bible, which we heard this morning, uses the word welcome – *Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me* whereas the NIV talks about receiving - *He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.* I prefer welcome as I think it goes further than just “receiving”. Particularly in today’s context receive means just that – there is no indication of the reaction of the recipient. Welcome on the other hand does indicate that the envoy, or letter, or message is in fact welcome, the recipient is pleased to receive the message.

Interestingly both the King James and RSV use “receive” whereas the Good News, New RSV and New Living all use “welcome”. Not being a scholar of New Testament Greek I cannot judge what Matthew really meant but in the context of Chapter 10 welcome seems right to me!!

What we see in this very short gospel reading is Jesus explaining to his new band of disciples that they are envoys for Him and also for “the one who sent me” – God the Father. But his passage must be put into context firstly the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s gospel is all about the selection and training of Jesus’s envoys. If we look at Matthew from a wider prospective we see a clear time line. Matthew is very careful in developing the Jesus story. He starts with Jesus genealogy then the birth narrative, the exile to Egypt, Jesus baptism in the Jordan, the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus unfolds his radical mission and then the choosing of the twelve apostles in chapter 10. Those chosen apostles can be in no doubt about the theology and political ideology that Jesus is proclaiming and they are being asked to support, live by and proclaim.

Immediately before today’s passage Jesus makes it very clear what his new apostles can expect - *Don’t think that I come to bring peace to the earth, I come to bring trouble, not peace.* Jesus knew that the message he was about to bring would not be welcome in many places, particularly by the leaders and powerful. Jesus then goes on to demand that they, the apostles, must put all that they hold dear – family and friends – behind them. But all this sacrifice will not be in vain as they will be welcomed and rewarded. Jesus’s warnings and rewards are as applicable today, but do we understand how radical a message Jesus brings? Just read Matthew 25 for starters – feed the hungry; provide

water for the thirsty; cloths for the naked; care for the sick and visit those in prison.

The Old Testament reading from Genesis is one of those readings many of us would like to forget. How could a loving God allow Abraham to even consider sacrificing his son in such a way? A son who had been so difficult to get. But as with many of the passages in the Bible we may not like there are important things to learn.

This is one of those parts of the Old Testament that we share with Islam. However for the Moslem it is more significant as it is commemorated at the Festival of Eid al-Adla which lasts 4 days. However there is one difference as Ismail is substituted for Isaac. Eid honours the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his young first-born son Ismail as an act of submission to God, before God then intervened to provide Abraham with a lamb to sacrifice instead.

I am not sure about other Islamic countries but in Bangladesh part of the Eid Festival includes the sacrifice by each family of an animal and the meat is then distributed, some to the poor. I still have vivid memories some years ago of going out into the courtyard of the guest house I was staying in in Dhaka during Eid and seeing a large cow with its throat cut laying on the ground waiting to be cut up with blood all over the courtyard. Thankfully the car that was taking me to the airport had arrived.

The meat from the sacrificed animal is usually divided into three parts. The family retains one third of the share; another third is given to relatives, friends and neighbors; and the remaining third is given to the poor and needy. The regular charitable practices of the Muslim community are demonstrated during Eid al-Adha by concerted efforts to see that no impoverished person is left without an opportunity to partake in the sacrificial meal during these days.

During Eid al-Adha, those distributing the meat amongst the people, chant

*God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest,*

*There is no deity but God.*

*God is the Greatest, God is the Greatest and to God goes all praise*

out loud before the Eid prayers on the first day and after prayers throughout the four days of Eid. This is an essential part of this important Islamic festival. Only the wealthiest could afford a cow, less wealthy would sacrifice a sheep or if less well off a chicken.

So how do we, as Christians, see the Biblical version of these events? In many ways it is the climax of the story of Abraham. This story is especially poignant in that Abraham believed that his son Ishmael by Hagar was dead (21:8-21). Now the "only son" Isaac is to be scarified at God's command. The two stories about Ismail and Issac are mirrors of each other, focusing on the potential loss of both sons, and God's provisions for both.

Abraham's silent response to God's command seems cruel but not surprising in the light of his action over Ismail. While God's command (in view of the promise) is bizarre, Abraham's response over the course of the journey is informed more and more by a conviction that God can be trusted finally to save Isaac; after all God has told him that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). In Abraham's eyes this places the burden back on God to be true to his promises.

Abraham conveys this confidence in God by means of his attentive response to Isaac's question. Isaac's response shows that he believes his father's trust is well placed. The provision of a ram for the sacrifice (which was God's intention from the beginning), and God's overriding of the original command with another, confirms Abraham's trust. God responds with a reiteration of the promises (22:15-19).

As Christians it is easy to see the prophetic element in this story. God sent his Son to this earth to as a sacrifice for us all but unlike Isaac a ram is not substituted for Jesus on the way to the Cross.

So what is the link between the OT and NT scriptures, I must admit I struggled at first to find such a link. If anything the two passages paint completely different images of God. However there is a link. God requires Abraham, and Isaac, to have faith in Him, and when Abraham demonstrates that faith both Abraham and Isaac are rewarded. Similarly Jesus is calling on his apostles to have faith in Him despite all the warnings he has given them about how they will be treated as His followers, and they in turn will be rewarded. Furthermore in both cases it is just the act of faith, nothing else, that God is asking for.

But there is more!!!! Jesus has no favourites – *anyone who welcomes you welcomes me* – Anyone, not just fellow Christians but anyone. This is of course very much in line with the inclusiveness of the New Testament and the Gospels in particular. In contrast the Old Testament does appear to be exclusive. The Jews are the chosen people and God is their God. But there are also inclusive

passages in the Old Testament, the one that immediately came to my mind is Isaiah 61

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me....*

which Jesus uses in Luke 4 to introduce his ministry and in Matthew 11 in response to John the Baptist's question about the validity of his ministry.

Although I have not done an exhaustive search I think that the vast majority of Jesus's references to the Old Testament scriptures are to passages that are basically inclusive. One of Jesus tasks from God was to breakdown the exclusiveness of the Jews, God is God for everyone not just the chosen people.

In the light of this I think we have to be very careful in taking passages from the Old Testament that are basically exclusive in nature and context and then applying them to our society today.

One of the real joys for me in preparing a sermon is the way in which God speaks anew through his scriptures. I must have read Isaiah 61 hundreds of times but it was only this time that I saw the final verse of the chapter

*The Lord will bring justice and peace to every nation on earth like flowers blooming in a garden.*

May this be our prayer this morning.

Amen