

Sunday Between 26th June and 2nd July [13]

Matthew 10:40-42

What a change in tone this week in comparison to last Sunday and yet the gospel passages are from the same teaching of Jesus, they are found back-to-back in the gospel of Matthew. Last week Jesus spoke of people turning against their own family and losing even their own life for his sake. This week Jesus offers the flipside to his message on punishment, by way of an encouragement of reward.

Whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me. This passage comes at the very end of Jesus' instructions to the twelve on how to behave as they go out without him into the community and preach in his name. For all of the warnings of the many difficulties they would face along the way and what punishment lay in wait for those who refused to accept their ministry, here at the very end, Jesus offers hope. For those who even give a little cup of water to these disciples, will be rewarded as though they had hosted God almighty.

It reinforces the parable Jesus told of the sheep and the goats on the day of judgement, whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me. Good or bad, helpful or harmful, we are judged on our behaviours towards one another. This still comes as a revelation to some today, even to those of us who have been Christians for decades. It bears repeating and explaining over and over because it is the thing we struggle with. We come to church, week by week, month by month. We say our prayers day by day, we read our scripture, perhaps meet together in home groups or bible study groups with like minded people. Our relationship with God is good, on the whole, most of the time.

But that isn't the whole story for us. We not only have a commandment to love God, we also have a commandment to love other people. Each person with whom we make contact, we are commanded to love them. It doesn't matter if they are like us or different from us, it doesn't matter if they love us in return. We have been left with no question that the other person we are commanded to love can be rejected based on any prejudices or perceived unworthiness. We love them not because of who they are, but because of who we are in Christ.

This is huge, we have heard this before but it doesn't get any less mind blowing as we consider it again. Human nature encourages us to be sceptical and fearful. We worry about people who are different from us, we fear what we don't understand. We naturally separate people into imaginary boxes and regularly consider others to be either "us" or "them" in all sorts of scenarios. Our society encourages that, our political system is designed to separate us into parties or differing groups based on our views and then pits us against others. The media would, with simplicity, tell us we can either believe in science or religion but not both. Books with titles like "Men are from Mars and Woman are from Venus" encourage us even to separate by gender in all things.

These and many other "us" and "them" scenarios are real and divisive but most importantly they are not of God. God's commandment to love God and love one another is played out in Jesus' words, "whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me." We cannot play society's games and obey God's command. When we separate we reject and exclude. "Us"

and "them" necessarily means that some are in and others out, when people are out, they are rejected, when they are rejected God is rejected. That is the flipside of what Jesus is saying. If our acceptance of righteous people is rewarded because receiving those people is the same as receiving God, then surely rejecting people is the same as rejecting God.

This is a message of hope offered to the disciples on an evangelism mission and it stands as both an offer of hope and a warning to us. Where we are doing the work of evangelism today in many and various ways we should take heart that God's promise never fails. We, too, go out as representative of Jesus, of God and where we are received, respected and heard, those who receive us are receiving God in their lives right along with us. But where we are in a position to receive another, under any circumstances, we must remember that God looks at how they are received. We are judged based on the fruits of the spirit shown in us. If we can see in one another what God sees in us, then each encounter truly becomes an encounter with God. Let us never miss an opportunity to receive Christ as we encounter people sent by him, sometimes when we least expect them!