

Free to welcome.

Who are you expecting? When we're getting ready for church on a Sunday morning, do we wonder who we're expecting? I'll be honest, I do. I'm wondering how many people will be here, will there be less or more than last week? If there's fewer people what does that mean about where the parish is going? If there's more, it's a bit of a relief. Or do we expect to see the same people and that's it? And I wonder if we ever think about who we're expecting to meet in the readings? Every reading has its author, most have their own characters, every gospel reading lets us encounter Jesus again. So, we have the potential to meet quite a few people in the readings and to be introduced to their lives and their contexts, and somehow through them we are invited to reflect on our own lives and contexts in the light of the Jesus we meet in the gospel. Except that this morning it's not that easy!

In Jeremiah we are presented with a confusing section that feels like it has been ripped completely out of its context and meaning. Which it has; we don't get the full picture here. The few verses we get are set in a 3 month period which saw the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, installed as a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar, who deported King Jehoiachin and the elite of society. As Judah struggles with this the surrounding nations, all vassal states to Babylon, come to conspire and to convince Zedekiah to join them in rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah puts on a heavy yoke and prophesies that the rebellion will fail because God has given them into service to Babylon for three generations. But Hananiah comes to the Temple to rebut Jeremiah's prophecy

and to prophesy that Nebuchadnezzar's yoke has already been broken and that the nobles and treasures will be returned to Jerusalem in two years, which is where we pick our reading up in this "prophetic showdown."¹

Jeremiah's response to Hananiah is slightly confusing, we don't know whether he's being sarcastic or hopeful. But Jeremiah can do nothing other than stand in the tradition of the prophets and in the tradition of his own prophetic career and warn again that Judah is reaping the consequences of their rebellion against God. His parting shot is, let's see if Hananiah's prophecy comes true.

We don't get the follow up, but God confirms Jeremiah's message with the picture of a wooden yoke being broken and an iron yoke being imposed on those nations who tried to rebel, and two months later Hananiah is dead. A gripping tale but what use for us? Let's put Jeremiah down and step away quietly.

So, we move on to Romans and immediately hit the pain of the language Paul uses. None of us should be able to hear the language of slavery and not question its appropriateness in these days in which we live. True we need to understand historical context, we need to understand that almost 1/3 of the Roman Empire's population were slaves, we need to understand that Paul's readers would have responded to the imagery. But we cannot glibly appropriate that imagery without knowing the pain, humiliation and legacy of slavery. We cannot glibly use terminology such as willingly making ourselves

¹ Rachel Sophia Baard, *Feasting on the Word, Year A volume 3*, p.170

slaves to God without knowing that slavery was never a choice, and that everything that is bound up with that concept, kidnap, rape, murder, dehumanisation still take their toll in our society today. We cannot be blind and deaf to that anymore, either willingly or unwillingly. So, let's drop that one and rush on to the gospel.

And in such a few verses we should be safe, but after all that we need more than a glass of water! These verses stand at the end of the Missionary Discourse in Matthew's gospel, the readings we've had over the last few weeks. Let's remind ourselves of those comforting messages: Jesus's disciples are being sent out as sheep among wolves; they will face persecution and imprisonment; they will be ridiculed and shunned; there will not be peace, the message of the Kingdom will tear families apart; whoever finds their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for Christ's sake will find it; whoever does not take up their cross and follow Christ is not worthy of him. And now, whoever welcomes you, welcomes me with talk of rewards and glasses of water thrown in for good measure.

Good grief, sometimes this Christianity thing is hard.

Who are we expecting? When we show up Sunday by Sunday, who are we expecting? Are we expecting Jeremiah, are we expecting to hear a message that challenges our comfort and makes us uneasy or do we want Hananiah, tickling our ears with promises of peace and comfort? Are we expecting St Paul and having to wrestle with how we hear and communicate concepts

central to our understanding of the gospel but jarring in these days in which we live? Are we expecting the Jesus that Matthew presents us, challenging and confrontational, or do we want the Jesus that talks about reward and comfort and nice shepherds?

Like Jeremiah we have to acknowledge that the tradition in which we stand always confronts the powers of this world, because if we don't then we are just like Hananiah, telling people what they want to hear. Like Paul we have to speak into situations that are complex and confusing but we do so with the compassion and grace that comes from Christ, we do so knowing that all is gift and all is grace, we tread softly into wounds and confusion, onto sacred territory to learn and to bring the free gift of God. As we hear the words of Jesus, so we recognise the need to welcome whoever comes our way, because we have been freed to welcome.

Paul tells us that we have the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, for him that equates to freedom from the dominion of sin, we are freed from the things that make us selfish and self-centred and freed to live in the beauty and possibility of the gift of grace. And that freedom means that we can hear the tough messages of Jeremiah because we no longer have to be numbed to the pain of the world, to the pain in our own lives because that free gift of grace is still as powerful today as it was when Paul was writing, still as active today still as necessary today.

And that means that we are free to welcome. Free to welcome those who look like us, think like us and act like us; free to welcome those who don't look like us, don't think like us and don't act like us; free to welcome those who challenge or unsettle us, free to welcome those who might make us rethink what we say, how we say it and where we say it. Free to welcome those for whom the message of salvation and freedom may be a hard one to hear and grasp.

Who are we expecting? In some senses we don't know what to expect when we rock up on a Sunday morning, in terms of the readings at least. But we always know that we will meet Christ in Word and Sacrament. We know that we will again be offered the free gift of eternal life that has been given to us not to hold on to but to share. We are reminded in our gospel reading that we stand in the "chain of mission."² Christ is sent, the disciples are sent, that's the meaning of the word apostle, sent one, and so too are we, apostles to Berwick and the Borders. Sent to offer "hospitality rooted in compassionate welcome, [which] is both a practice and a spiritual discipline in which we discover that by offering hospitality we may be welcoming something or someone new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives."³

That offer of welcome is at the heart of what we do here this morning, the lavish welcome of God to this altar and the sacrament. That offer of welcome is at the heart of who we are as a church, the daily welcome we offer, the

² Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of St Matthew*,

³ Emilie M Townes, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 3*, p.192

Year A
Proper 8 / Fourth Sunday After Trinity
Jeremiah 28:5-9
Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

welcome we have offered our schools, music events, funeral families and wedding couples over the last few weeks.

But it starts with us receiving the welcome on offer, the free gift of life, being freed to not only accept God's welcome but to go and offer it. Who are you expecting this morning? God is expecting you.