

WELCOME

An Advent Address in a series on the Benedictine Themes
of Prayer, Learning, and Welcome.

Welcome to this Advent talk, the third in a series of addresses this season which explore the values in Worcester Cathedral's vision document. The vision document sets out five areas or themes but each of these is underpinned by, influenced by, and indeed seen through the lens of three values: prayer, learning, and welcome. The three values are shaped by our Benedictine heritage and we have already heard in the first talk by the dean of the cathedral's Benedictine foundation, the Rule of Benedict and the primary value of prayer. Last week, the Rev'd Sue Adeney explored the cathedral's learning tradition and this week I shall look at the third value, welcome.

It is not surprising that my first word at the beginning of this talk was welcome. In fact it is among the first words at every cathedral act of worship, event, and gathering. Welcome is so primary that the word is a constant greeting. A few months ago I was fortunate to attend a party where the hosts said a few words after we had eaten. Knowing that most of the people there were regular attenders at the Sung Eucharist at the cathedral, they took the opportunity to poke a little fun at those of us who take services here. 'Welcome to everyone at this dinner party, welcome to those who are here for the first time, and welcome to those of you joining us online'.

The laughter was genuine – mainly as it mimicked what I and my colleagues say daily, but it also reminded me that the word 'welcome' is almost impossible to replace with another. We have numerous ways to greet someone – good morning, hello, hi, good day. But there are, as far as I can tell, no other words to replace welcome as a form of greeting.

Of course, welcome has a number of synonyms when used as an adjective, verb or noun, but as an exclamation there are, as far as I can tell, none. If you know of one, please let me know.

So in this talk I hope to explore the meanings of welcome, and the purpose of welcome as we draw closer to welcoming the Christ child in our celebrations of his birth. And I shall also say something about the challenge of welcome. After all, the word is – on occasion - easier to say than to do.

Before I go any further, let me read from the Cathedral's vision document what it says about our welcome:

Welcome

We carry Christ's love into the world, working with others for the good of all people. We welcome with dignity and respect everyone who enters this building. We are committed to the safeguarding of children and adults at risk of harm. We will ensure

that the Cathedral a house of peace, a comfortable space, where anyone – whatever their belief or background – may find a place to think, pray, or wonder.

The copy of the Rule of Benedict which I have at home contains the word welcome but that isn't the case for all translations. The word used in many translations is 'received' – most notably and widely quoted in the beautiful opening sentence of the 53 chapter of the rule, 'of how guests are to be received': *'Let all guests that happen to come be received as Christ'*. And the extension of this receiving, this welcoming, is that one of the particular charisms, or gifts of the Benedictine tradition is hospitality. It is a fundamental Christian practice to be hospitable.

It is of course a very basic human reaction to offer hospitality to friends and those we know or feel comfortable. But within Christianity – as with other faith traditions – there is also a commandment, a principle, of being hospitable to strangers too. The inherent difficulty with this is something I shall return to at the end of this talk. But hospitality is so tied up with our view of Benedictine life, that we might say that it is a definite characteristic of that tradition.

Our list of values does not include the word hospitality which one might expect to see, but rather the more immediate, and perhaps simpler, term of welcome. Is there a difference? Is this difference worth exploring? Well yes there is and I would like briefly to consider that.

Hospitality is usually friendly and – we hope – generous! It is about receiving and entertaining guests and visitors – whether they be known to us or they are strangers. It is an act, a deed, a spread, a warmth. It is the tangible, sometime visible, sometimes edible, sometimes tasted, sometimes felt, manifestation of the way we want to greet someone. Hospitality is the product of welcome.

Of course not all hospitality stems from welcome. It is possible to give someone a drink, food, or a seat without feeling any warmth or welcome towards them. The word itself has become commercialised, with a whole industry named for it and worth millions of pounds. Hospitality is a product of welcome – and indeed must always be the product of welcome – but it is also something which can be reduced to an action, an event, and perhaps worst of all, a profit.

But welcome is different. There is an irony in that a word which is bandied around so regularly and used so often without thought can only mean one thing. You might argue that hospitality can only mean one thing, but as an action, and even as a gift, it can be reduced to a performance or activity. Welcoming somebody – even when it is misused, or offered without thought, can only be defined as a greeting, and a greeting is an intentional act of recognising someone – of acknowledgement. That's not to say it cannot, and is not, misused – I am sure we have all greeted someone through gritted teeth at times. But even an insincere welcome is a greeting of acknowledging somebody's presence.

Perhaps I am overthinking or over-working this meaning, perhaps they are more connected than I am suggesting, but hospitality remains an act. Welcome – from which hospitality must and will naturally flow – is an intention.

The Rule of Benedict seamlessly combines teachings for the heart, mind and soul together with practicalities, rules, and guidance for the day to day life of those living in community. The chapter which concerns itself with receiving guests comes directly after a chapter about the oratory, the community's chapel. In that chapter - outlining the singular purpose of that place in the monastery – Benedict also touches on the oratory of the heart. The purity of the heart as the ultimate, foundational, and prime space for adoration and prayer.

In her commentary on the Rule of St Benedict, Esther de Waal explains why this oratory – this place of prayer – is so vital for understanding the receiving, or welcoming of guests. She writes:

It is only because I carry a heart of silence that I can welcome the guest. The chapter on the oratory of the monastery and the oratory of the heart lays the foundation for what Benedict now gives us, discussion of the exercise of hospitality. This is one of his most important chapters. He opens, as he so often does, with a short and beautiful maxim which lays down the foundational theological principle from which all the rest will flow. Whoever comes is to be received as Christ himself. The idea that Christ is to be received, welcomed, adored is stated no less than three times, repeated at intervals in the course of the practical legislation for the care of guests. If this is Benedictine hospitality then it is a lot easier to repeat the maxim than to live it out. (Esther de Waal)

So what does this famous chapter on receiving guests say? What does it tell us, and why is it so demanding? Every sentence within the chapter is rich with instruction but I want to divide the chapter into three welcomes which will deal welcoming Christ, radical welcome, and welcoming the stranger.

The first welcome I have termed *welcoming Christ*, but is perhaps better described as welcoming people as if they are Christ. As we have seen this is at the heart of the Rule and at the heart of the meaning of greeting and welcome. In other words it is the recognition of a person, and the recognition of that person as Christ himself. Almost half of the chapter from its opening on speaks of the guest as Christ. Let me read from the rule:

Let all guests that happen to come be received as Christ, because He is going to say: "A Guest was I and ye received Me." And let suitable honour be shewn to them all, especially to those who are of the household of the faith and to strangers. When therefore a guest shall have been announced, let him be met by the superior or by the brethren, with all due courtesy; and let them at once betake themselves to prayer together and so let them associate together in peace, because the kiss of peace may not be offered first, but only when preceded by prayer, so as to avoid the snares of Satan: and in the salutation itself let all humility be manifest. Whenever guests arrive

or depart, let Christ be adored in them—for Him indeed we receive in them—by bowing of the head or by full prostration. And when the guests have been received let them be taken to pray and then let the superior, or whomsoever he shall have appointed, sit with them. Let the divine law be read in the presence of a guest, that he may be edified; and after this let all courtesy be shewn him.

Here we have three aspects of welcoming Christ:

- The recognition and adoration of Christ
- The honour and courtesy shown to guests
- The acknowledgement of prayer and the presence of holiness

These three aspects – all of them inseparable - are not merely aspirational or spiritual goals, but are described with all practicality – particular ways to make manifest the holiness of each action.

The story is told that St Benedict had spent three years in a cave, alone, praying in solitude, unaware of time. A priest arrived to give Benedict company at Easter though Benedict did not know it was Easter at all. However having been greeted by the priest, Benedict at once realises it is Easter and sees in the priest – the stranger – the joy of the resurrection, the new life of an encounter which brings him face to face with the risen Lord. There is of course something deeply incarnational about seeing the face of Christ, seeing the image of God, in our fellow human beings – we who are made in the image of God. But this story about Benedict's Easter recognition adds another layer – that of the new life, the resurrection life which opens a way for us to see Christ in those we welcome as the opportunity for a new beginning, a resetting, a resurrecting of way we present ourselves to others, and how we allow them to be present for us.

At both the incarnation and the resurrection those who meet Christ are drawn to adore him – in the kneeling of shepherds and magi, or in the acclamation of Mary in the garden. The Rule commands this response to all guests and is a challenge to us as we meet both friends and strangers. How do we receive them? Do we see the risen Christ? Do we see the image of God?

The chapter, as we heard, also contains the command to show honour, courtesy and respect. Two aspects of this strike me in particular. The first is that the guest is to be introduced to the superior. Later in the chapter we hear that the superior is to dine with the guest, the guest is to sit with the superior. There is an honouring which can only stem from the discipline of holiness and the acceptance, recognition, and receiving of Christ himself. But the other aspect of this courtesy is that Benedict explicitly mentions the especial reception of those '*who are of the household of the faith and to strangers*'. Strangers we would expect – and I shall talk more of that in a short while, but the mention of the especial welcome to those of the household of faith is, perhaps, telling.

It is a sadness and truth that the divisions with the Church sometimes prevent us from showing the kindness and grace to our Christian sisters and brothers that we might more

readily show to strangers. When Benedict talks of especially welcoming those of the household of faith, I do not think this is an act of preference – for he clearly demands a welcome for all – but rather a special effort to overcome those things which sadly divide us, keep us apart, or prevent us from the embrace of others who walk the path of faith, but in a different tradition.

The final theme of this word on receiving guests is the importance of prayer. As I said earlier this chapter follows on from the chapter on the oratory and the importance of purity of the heart as the place of prayer. Here we find that after the initial greeting and welcome, the first act, the first shared task, the primary activity from which everything else flows, is that the welcomer and the welcomed pray together. As I said earlier, I am sure we have all greeted someone through gritted teeth, we have been guilty of an insincere greeting, or of offering hospitality as a performance. The rule brings this home with raw words:

let them at once betake themselves to prayer together and so let them associate together in peace, because the kiss of peace may not be offered first, but only when preceded by prayer, so as to avoid the snares of Satan

Perhaps even the most difficult welcome can become gracious – even loving, even Christlike – if it is immediately wrapped in prayer. The re-centering of the soul, resets us into the right relationship with God and only then can we have a right relationship with one another. It is a small story but a simple and telling one, but I recall getting into a friend's car not long after he was ordained and commenting on the small cross fixed to his dashboard. He said it helped him, not in his driving or road rage, but as he got into the car or out of the car when visiting someone he was drawn to recognise Jesus in whoever he met. He readily admitted that he was drawn to the image more when he needed especial courage, grace and fortitude, rather than when visiting the easier people.

The next welcome I would like to explore about welcome is radical welcome. Again, I want to look at this through the chapter in the Rule of Benedict about receiving guests:

For hospitality's sake the superior may break his fast, unless by chance it be a fast-day of obligation, the which cannot be violated: but let the brethren continue to observe their custom of fasting. Let the abbot serve water for the guests' hands; and let both the abbot and also the whole community wash all the guests' feet: and the washing finished let them say this versicle: "We have received Thy mercy, O God, in the midst of Thy temple."

I said I would explore radical welcome and you might not think these words suggest anything that radical, but these sentences suggest ways in which we might think and behave radically differently from the normal way we go about things. The superior will set aside one set of rules in order to maintain the higher rule of receiving a guest. The superior will ignore all but the most important fast days so that the guest may eat. From fast to feast is a radical overturning of the rules for good reason. Like so many rules and regulations, the order to fast on certain days is to grow in discipline and faith – not to simply suffer for the

sake of simplicity. The reception of a guest offers a more excellent way of fashioning the discipline of love and so feast takes over from fasting because it is for the good and the recognition of the other.

In the teachings of Jesus, and in the life of the Church through her reforms and renewal, we see this approach repeated again and again. When rules 'rule', love finds no space. When rules shape us they guide us into further love. But how keen we are to follow the rules when they are convenient for us! How eager we are to enforce the rules when we can hide behind them. The Rule of St Benedict is – as its name suggests – a set of rules, but these rules are guideposts, markers which we grab on to in order to pull us forward along the pathway of faithful discipleship. There is one ultimate rule which triumphs over all others, that of loving God. In eating with the guest, the superior eats with Christ and so love is made manifest. I wonder how ready we are to set aside those customs and habits which prevent us from truly recognising Christ in others. The radical welcome sometimes calls for us to step forward along the path trusting in God alone, and daring to step outside our comfort zone and into a place of radical hospitality.

This stepping outside our comfort zone is very clearly shown in the washing of feet which Benedict commends to the community in replicating Christ's own act of service and humility. The washing of feet in Jesus' time would have been performed by servants and to those recognised as having some kind of superiority, social or otherwise. Jesus turns this on its head and his love brings him to serve the most humble. Peter's discomfort with this action at the Last Supper tells us a great deal about its significance. Welcome – the receiving of guests – not only leads to prayer and hospitality, but also to service. All of this is bound up in the command to recognise Christ in the guest and to adore the presence of the divine in the unexpected.

Yet this radical welcome, this turning upside of social norms, conventions, and practices around welcome, is increased even further in the third type of welcome: that of welcoming the stranger. The chapter on the receiving of guests continues:

And above all let care be scrupulously shewn in receiving the poor and strangers; for in them specially is Christ received. For the fear that the rich inspire itself secures deference for them.

I feel fairly confident and safe in saying that all of us prefer to welcome those we know than those we don't. And even more confident in saying that we prefer to welcome those who we think we know rather than those who we make presumptions about. These presumptions, assumptions, and projections on to people about who they might be, how they might react, and perhaps more tellingly what we think might be the best way to offer welcome, can lead us to react in many ways. We might be so sensitive as to get it right, or we might be so insensitive as to offer a welcome which is patronising at best, or discriminatory or exclusive at worst.

St Benedict list two categories of people in which Christ ought to be most specially received: the poor and strangers. I am very conscious that I have left it to towards the end of my talk, where time is upon us, for me to address the most difficult and challenging aspect of welcome.

In the beatitudes Jesus proclaims, Blessed are the poor. Bishop Laurie Green wrestles with this uncomfortable statement, he writes:

What did Jesus really mean when he looked at his followers and announced, 'blessed are you who are poor'? I have struggled for many years to understand just what he meant by that pronouncement and I've never found any of the usual answers to be at all satisfying. Those of us who have been poor, or lived with poor people for substantial parts of our lives or ministries, are only too aware that the lives of the poor are blighted by lack of opportunity and exclusion. How then can Jesus call such people blessed? It would appear that the Church through the centuries has found this particular teaching so profoundly unsettling that it has either assumed that Jesus did not mean what he said, that he was simply exaggerating for effect, or that he was putting a rather romantic gloss on the real situations that confront the poor.

In recent years difficult questions have been asked of the Church of England, for it is true that the Church's ministry to the poor has been underfunded, with more money spent per head of population on suburbia than in areas scoring higher on the index of deprivation. The preference for the poor is integral to Jesus' ministry and indeed the incarnation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says

he comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbour, as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you, makes demands on you.

But this preference does not always filter through the institutions of the church, and yet we pay lip service to this principle which is inherent in the gospel. Is it because the poor are different from those who make important decisions about deployment, ministry, training, and communications? Is it because the poor are seen as different from those who exercise the power, and dare we say the privilege?

Speaking of those who are different leads us the Benedict's other category in whom Christ is especially received. The stranger. Strangers are those with whom we are unfamiliar, those who are unknown. But it is often the case that we equate strangers with the strange – in other words those who are different, and different in such a way that we are uncomfortable and uneasy. Any welcome offered to one who we assume to be strange requires us to move out of our own cultural norm, out of our own known place, and to see, to think, to hear differently. It is a practice which requires both prayer and learning. *Prayer* because we do well to place ourselves firmly in the presence of the one in whose image all people are made, and *learning* because we have a duty to be open to the other – setting our own needs to one side and learning again from the person in front of us.

There are many examples of those who are 'othered', treated as strangers rather than welcomed. I want to close with an example which describes this exclusion but also serves as a lesson in endurance, possibility and above all transformation and hope.

The Anglican priest, Lorraine Dixon writes on identity and belonging in the Church of England reflecting on her experience of growing up as a Black woman within the church and how she reacted to her feelings of exclusion or difference. In this her reflection resonates with the stories of other marginalised groups and their desire to assimilate before gaining confidence of identity to demand acceptance on their own grounds. She outlines the ways in which the Black identity within the mainstream churches remained hidden, or unacknowledged and yet resilient and a resource for survival.

The rejection, or at best cold reception, of Black worshippers within the mainstream churches in the 1950s and 60s was influenced by a stereotyping of Christian faith as well as pure racism.

We are written out because we are perceived not to matter or have significance, we have not taken or been given power. We need to reclaim our stories, our inheritance, our place in time and space, ultimately our healing. We have chosen to remain in these churches, many of us feel called by God to remain, to be an irritant. ... We have a right to be in them and no matter what, we remain. Perseverance and faithfulness are indeed valued traits of the Christian's walk in the Spirit. (Lorraine Dixon)

This perseverance, even through being an 'irritant', can produce a transformative effect on the Church's self-identity: she says *'The sacrament of Black presence has sought to herald a realized vision of freedom, equality and change for all.'*

In this season of Advent as we prepare to welcome the Christ child, we can wait with expectation: expectation that we will change, that transformation can and will happen. This is the gift of welcoming others – we are transformed by that welcome and so, encounter by encounter, soul by soul, we are conformed to the pattern of the Christ we share.

*Let all guests that happen to come be received as Christ, because He is going to say:
"A Guest was I and ye received Me."*

Stephen Edwards
Vice-Dean