

Genesis 22:1–14 Psalm 13 Romans 6:12–23 Matthew 10:40–42

Choosing a braver faith – Julia Denny-Dimitriou

Prayer

*God of steadfast love, today we remember Jesus' words: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." We pray to welcome the outcast as we would welcome you, to do what we can to provide water to the stranger, and to trust always that you will be there. We pray to know that kindness is brave, but always worthwhile, and that where love is, there you are. **Amen.** –*
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What could seem more insignificant than offering someone a cup of cold water? In a short time, they will be thirsty again. However, depending on the context, it could mean the difference between life and death.

Jesus' use of the term "righteous" reminded me of a significant way the term is used today, perhaps better known in the Jewish community than in mainstream Australia: "A righteous Gentile". Those of you who have travelled in Israel may have been to *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem, the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. You probably walked down the *Avenue of the Righteous* in the *Garden of the Righteous among the Nations*.

For those remembered there, practising the kind of hospitality, or welcoming described in today's brief Gospel reading, metaphorically "offering a cup of water", could indeed have meant the difference between life and death. It meant survival and life for those Jews who managed to escape the Holocaust, and possible death for those who helped them and were betrayed or found out.

One remarkable story that drew me, is that of Dr Mohamed Helmy, a medical doctor born in Egypt who studied in Germany and settled in Berlin. He himself was persecuted by the Nazis, a Muslim and defined as a *Hamit* or Hamitic (the descendants of Ham, son of Noah), interrogated regularly and held captive for a year. However, from 1942 until the end of the war he helped to

hide some family friends who survived and relocated to the USA. “Dr Helmy did everything for me out of the generosity of his heart and I will be grateful to him for eternity,” one of them wrote. In March 2013, on the urging of family of those he helped, *Yad Vashem* recognized Dr Helmy as *Righteous Among the Nations*. (Yadvashem.org)

Another phrase used in the passage possibly feels awkward to our ear: “*He who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man...*” This is said to be a Semitic expression meaning “because one is” (Boring, 263), and Jesus is said to have used it to make the application specific, suggesting that the people mentioned should be welcomed specifically because they are prophets, righteous or disciples.

As I have mentioned before, identity in the ancient world was tied to family and community. It was understood that in showing hospitality, the host welcomed not just an individual, but by implication, the community who sent the person and all that they represented. Therefore, welcoming a disciple of Jesus would mean receiving the very presence of Jesus himself and of the one who sent him, God the Father. This is recorded at the start of the reading where Jesus says: “*He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.*” (verse 40).

As we have noted already in looking at Matthew 10, Jesus has warned the disciples of the potential consequences that await them as he prepares them to carry on his work. That commission also has possible consequences for those who will welcome them into their homes, perhaps a little like the potential consequences of helping Jews during World War II.

Jesus’ words hold out a simple but difficult commission to those of us who also want to be counted among the disciples: To recognise Jesus and other prophetic voices in the most marginalised people in society, and to choose generosity. The action he suggests – to offer a cup of cold water to another – is quite small, but often feels impossibly difficult. We seldom acknowledge how much courage it can take to be generous and

inclusive. Hospitality requires energy and bravery and the interesting thing about just “a cup of cold water” is that it is not an action of huge magnitude, it is a temporary solution at best: We are not called to save the world, but to do our small part. As Francis of Assisi said: “I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you to do what is yours.”

The relative ease of our lives, mentioned last week, can be dangerous, drowning out our desire to choose a braver faith, to act on braver loves – of family, the community, strangers, justice, and those on the margins. Love has always been, in some ways, countercultural and dangerous.

As we know, early followers of Christ were themselves targeted by authorities for disrupting social structures e.g. within their places of worship, calling slaves and masters equal. But they knew that to welcome outsiders was to welcome Christ.

What this passage seems to suggest is that faith is an allegiance to a braver love that pushes us outside our comfort zones: Love everyone whom the world rejects, because in doing so you love God. We only have to look at recent news coverage, to see who our society rejects and who is currently suffering: First Australians, international students, refugees and asylum seekers and Asian people, who have become the target of racism and persecution because of the “Chinese virus” or “Kung ‘flu” as Donald Trump has called it.

We and all baptised people are sent into the world to tell and embody the good news of Jesus. We are sent to bear Christ to others with humility and vulnerability, even to being willing to risk rejection.

Thinking about the Gospel reading and the idea of “choosing a braver faith”, three questions might be useful for our reflections:

- What impact did a simple act of hospitality have on me?
- To what extent might fear block me from generosity or love?

- Who comes to mind as marginalised people whom I could welcome?

I want to conclude with the prayer that was in the pew sheet at the beginning of the lockdown:

Brave Space

*Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as 'safe space'
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space...
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love.
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But it will be our brave space together,
And we will work on it side by side.*

- Micky ScottBey Jones on "Brave Space"

References

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