

Year A

Matthew 10:40-42

What were they to do with Jim? Jim was an awkward and shy child who belonged to the church kids club. It was time to hand out roles for the Christmas play, but what role should the teacher give Jim? She decided on the inn-keeper. It was an important role, but required Jim only to shake his head and say one line “Sorry, we’ve no room.” Jim grinned from ear to ear when he learned of his important role and he couldn’t wait for the big night.

It arrived soon enough, and the play was proceeding according to plan. Mary and Joseph had traveled to Bethlehem and come to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked on the door and it opened to Jim. "Please sir, do you have a room we could take?" asked Joseph. Jim shook his head and replied. "I'm sorry, we've no room".

Now the boy playing Joseph was a particularly confident child, and while the script called for he and Mary to turn away at this point, Joseph decided to exercise some dramatic license. "But sir" he said to the innkeeper, "My wife is about to have her

baby and we need somewhere to stay. Couldn't you find us a room." Jim's face went white – this was not planned for! – and he paused for a moment before repeating his line. "I'm sorry, we've no room."

"But sir" replied Joseph, "We've traveled such a long way and we've nowhere else to go and my wife is very tired. Surely you can find us somewhere." Jim bowed his head, shook it sadly and said, "I'm sorry, we've no room." Forlornly Joseph and Mary started walking away. Jim, now fully into his role, felt shamed and saddened. A tear trickled down his cheek. Then his voice was heard calling

out. “Wait! Please come back. You can have my room.”

It may not have been according to script, but at that moment Jim gave perfect expression to the Christmas story.

The readings in Matthew’s Gospel continue today with Jesus’ concluding comments to his disciples who he was sending out on missionary journeys. He offered them insight into the decision that people would be confronted with when they showed up at their doors, hungry and thirsty and in need of hospitality. We are invited as eavesdroppers today to hear the insight and

to be encouraged to respond the right way when a stranger knocks on our door too. So, as much as this passage was to be a realistic encouragement to the travelling disciple so it also was to be an encouragement to the prospective welcomer to do the right thing and to receive their reward.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu."¹

Siobhan Garrigan, Loyola Professor of Theology at Trinity College, Dublin, told of her experiences researching her book, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics and the*

¹ Our Daily Bread, March 6, 1994.

*End of Sectarianism.*² She arrived for worship at a Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. She was greeted by two women at the door who began a conversation with her. They asked her her name and when she gave it they encouraged her to exit and follow down the road to the local Catholic Church where she was sure to find a warm welcome! This was not the dim and distant past; this was 1990s Northern Ireland.

How can a simple welcome become the most difficult of graces to offer?

² 2010 London: Equinox Publishing

I was struck by the welcome printed on a church bulletin and Order of Service I read recently. It read:

“WELCOME

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, in a partnership, divorced, widowed, gay, confused, filthy rich, comfortable, or dirt poor. We extend a special welcome to wailing weans and excited toddlers.

We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You're welcome here if 'you're just browsing,' just woken up or just got out of prison. We

don't care if you're more Christian than the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, or haven't been to church since Christmas twenty years ago.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet and teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like 'organised religion.' (We're not that keen on it either).

We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't

spell or are here because you are at a loose end. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both or neither. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as children or got lost in the Square and wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters . . . and you!

You are very welcome.”³

If we react to that with any kind of reservation then we’re standing alongside the ladies’ welcoming committee in the

³ <http://www.cullen-deskford-church.org.uk/orders/065order07May2017.pdf>

Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. We're asking personal questions so that we can decide who is welcome here. We are in the business of qualifying our hospitality. That is our right but we have to be aware that if we're going to do that there may be a day when someone else will exercise his right to qualify his hospitality and send us down the road to somewhere else. We must not complain when that day comes because that will be our just reward. So these hard teachings of Jesus continue.

How can a simple welcome become the most difficult of graces to offer? Yet, this is at the

heart of Christianity. It is the most difficult of graces to offer because it cuts straight to the heart of our faith. We can only offer a welcome to the hungry and the thirsty and the abused when we have first received a welcome as people who are hungry and thirsty and abused. Our God has welcomed us first. Our God is the Father who spots the wayward son a long way down the road, returning in a terrible, self-inflicted state, and proceeds to run down the road to meet him not with a big stick in his hands but with outstretched arms of love. How do we respond to him? We're not going to be

obstructive, are we? Of course not, we're going to receive his welcome, his hospitality, without grumbling and if we have any sense we're going to turn to the stranger and offer the hand of welcome; the embrace of acceptance; not with a grudging obligation but with joy because this is what we have been made for, the reconciliation of the world to God through the love of Christ and his family.