

Showing Up

Matthew 10:40-42

[Show traditional images of Jesus]

Some years ago I was involved in a Clinical Pastoral Education course. The course was run over 5 months and there was a practical component. So, as part of my practice I did several hours a week of volunteer visiting at Flinders Medical Centre. But, I went in, not as Pastor John, visiting Lutheran patients, but just as John Strelan . . . just another member of the pastoral care team, visiting patients who had indicated no affiliation with the Christian faith . . . or *any* faith. These were just random people who were in hospital. I found this quite challenging. It didn't help that, before I started, my supervisor advised me to be ready for anything! There might be patients who wouldn't appreciate my visit! There might be patients who might be outright hostile!

I have been in many hospitals before, but always with my title 'Pastor'. It was very different being at Flinders without an official title . . . surrounded by hundreds of highly qualified doctors and nurses and allied health staff all with important jobs to do . . . here I was, just a visitor . . . visiting people who may not even want a visit! In this environment my biggest challenge was figuring out why I was there . . . what did I have to offer . . . did it even matter? Would it make any difference? Would *I* make any difference?

When Jesus commissions his disciples to go out and continue his mission he advises them to be ready for anything. Actually, he leaves them in no doubt about the challenges they'll face: they'll be sheep among wolves . . . arrested and dragged before authorities and flogged . . . persecuted, betrayed by members of their own families . . . they'll even have to face death. That's quite a daunting task.

And, perhaps, we too as followers of Christ face a similar daunting task . . . not because we face persecution and death, thank goodness, in fact, just the opposite. It seems we've got it all too easy . . . and if we compare ourselves with those first disciples it seems like we have nothing to offer. Their commission was to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and drive out demons. I don't know about you, but I'm not too confident about my ability to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers or drive out demons. So, what is our commission? Isn't it to tell people about Jesus? So, is that all we have to offer? Just words? No wonder they laugh at us! No wonder they think it's fantasy. No wonder we're a bit hesitant at times to fulfil our commission.

So, whatever the era . . . whatever the context, the task of discipleship has always been a daunting one, but Jesus has some amazing words for his disciples, then, *and* now. He says to us as he said to them: "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me"!

Amazing words for disciples that face ridicule and rejection and persecution and death. In amongst the hardened hearts and closed minds will be ones who *will* welcome . . . who *will* accept . . . who *will* hear the message. Their mission will not be in vain. These are words of encouragement for a daunting task. And there are disciples still in many parts of the world today that face that sort of scenario. These are words they need to hear.

But, these are also amazing words for disciples who have got it pretty easy . . . who aren't facing persecution or intimidation . . . but, perhaps are not quite sure of their commission . . . not quite sure about their ability . . . not quite sure how to go about being a disciple. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Whoever welcomes you welcomes Jesus. Just let that sink in. Whoever welcomes you welcomes Jesus. So, being a disciple, fulfilling Jesus' commission, is not so much about what you *do* than about who you are! Whoever welcomes you, welcomes Jesus. You are a baptised child of God . . . a brothers or sister of Christ . . . when others welcome you into their lives, they are already blessed simply by that action. They are blessed because they have welcomed Jesus. They are blessed because the kingdom of God has come near to them. The Holy Spirit has an opportunity to work in their lives. That's their reward. Because you showed up!

And, it doesn't matter who you are . . . someone with prophetic gifts . . . a really amazing person of faith . . . a righteous person . . . someone who has a natural ability at evangelism . . . or just one of the 'little ones' . . . an ordinary person, with no great special skills or piety, it doesn't matter who you are. All you have to do is be who you are . . . just be and others will be blessed by your presence. And, guess what? In the process you too will be blessed, even if it is just a cup of cold water, you too will be blessed.

So, I doubt Jesus *ever* looked like that [traditional images of Jesus] . . . he may have . . . but I do know what Jesus looks like now! I can show you. Today he looks like this [hold up mirror].

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.

It was only after several weeks into the Clinical Pastoral Education course that I began to understand that those amazing words of Jesus applied to me and my hospital visiting. Visiting strangers was a difficult task and I questioned what I had to offer those people lying there in their hospital beds. I couldn't heal them. I couldn't build long term relationships with them. In many cases I couldn't even cheer them up. After a while I realised that sometimes all I could do was to be there. Just be there. And be *me*. I was just one of the 'little ones'. No fancy title. No great words of wisdom to share. Just me. And, I just had to be. I just had to turn up. That was enough.

I didn't get anyone throw me out of their room, or verbally abuse me, but I did get some polite rejections. (Not looking up from the newspaper was a subtle signal!) I also got a lot of cups of cold water! I don't mean that literally. Sometimes it was just a smile, that's all it took to say, "Welcome, I'm glad you're here." A cup of cold water. What a blessing. So, I sat and listened mostly, but sometimes I just sat. I was there. And, I was surprised by the number of conversations that came around to faith and church and God. I didn't initiate it . . . that must have been the Holy Spirit . . . I was just there!

Whoever welcomes you welcome me. That's Jesus' promise. An amazing promise. For each of us. And for whoever welcomes us. So, all we need to do is to be available to be welcomed. We can practice that here, amongst ourselves, but we can't stay here in our little Christian enclave. We have to be in the world. Engaged with the world. Engaged with the people of the world, so whoever welcomes us, welcomes Jesus.

So, the kingdom of God continues to come near.

Amen.

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Pentecost 5, 2026