

Sermon – St Peter’s, Brighton Beach

2 July 2023

Matthew 10: 40-42

Jesus tells His disciples that whoever *receives you receives Me*. That is, when someone accepts them into their homes to provide hospitality, and those who receive the Kingdom message that Jesus commissioned His disciples to share, they are really receiving Jesus. The disciples are functioning as ambassadors of the Messiah. They are heralds of the King.

Moreover, *he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me*. Anyone who accepts Jesus and His message also accepts God the Father who sent Him into the world. Jesus came to earth in obedience to His Father’s will. The Son himself came to be God’s Rescuer and Redeemer. Anyone *who receives the Son, receives the Father who sent Him*.

Jesus then describes a simple act of intentional kindness and offers His assurance that even these types of actions will *not* go unrequited. And His offer applies to *whoever* does the action. And the action is giving *one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple*. This reward would appear to apply to anyone who listens to a *disciple*, decides to follow that disciple’s instructions and therefore gives a *cup of cold water to one of these little ones*.

We all like to be rewarded for our efforts. Gold stars on our school assignments as children. Praise from parents and teachers as we get older. Money as payment for our expenditure of our time and talents in our work. Perhaps being recognized publicly with a plaque or round of applause for our community service. We all appreciate due recognition and benefits from our endeavours.

Jesus is promising a reward for those who welcome prophets and righteous persons to the community, and for those who offer small kindnesses to the vulnerable in their midst. That reward is participation in the kingdom of God, which has both a present and a future component.

This text comes after Jesus' promise that those who lose their life for his sake will find it in an earlier verse. It's an answer to the question, "What is our reward for risking the loss of our lives as we know them for you?"

Or, as Simon Peter so pragmatically puts it, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Jesus refers to "the reward of the righteous." It appears to be a bountiful compensation for the sacrifices we have made in this life, one that has both a worldly and eternal life component.

What are those addressed by this text going to be rewarded for? Since Jesus sends his disciples to act on his behalf, those who receive them also receive Jesus. And in receiving Jesus they also receive God, the one who sent him. Underlying this saying is the *shaliach* conception of ancient Jewish law, according to which a man's duly authorized messenger "is as the man himself." The one sent out represents the one who sent him, so that to receive a disciple of Christ is to receive Christ and to receive Christ is to receive God.

There is much scholarly debate about the identity of the persons referred to in this brief passage: *righteous ones*, *prophets*, and *little ones*. In Matthew's gospel, the disciples themselves embody all three identities. Matthew emphasizes that disciples serving as Jesus' agents are his righteous ones and prophets. For him, disciples were also little ones, the easily oppressed and powerless who depended solely on God.

The disciples are therefore prophets; they are the righteous who "let their light shine before men as they minister to the towns and villages of Israel. And they are the little ones. They have nothing and might even be in need of a cup of cold water.

Those who receive the disciples also receive the same benefits or reward they receive, the blessing of participation in the kingdom of God as outlined by Jesus by way of Matthew in the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes have a future, but also a present reference. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake—all participate in the present in the blessings of divine presence, comfort, wisdom, forgiveness, which are the realities of the reign of God now and forever.

Participation in the kingdom of God is the reward of the righteous person. It is not wholly extrinsic like the gold stars and the round of applause.

Rather, the righteousness Jesus is talking about in Matthew carries with it an intrinsic reward, one that is an integral part of the action of welcome and kindness. Such righteous acts participate in and point us toward God.

Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton once said, "Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. Love, therefore, is its own reward."

Reading this quote, one gets the impression that these people are not doing good things for others solely for the resulting pleasure of feeling good about what they've done and about themselves. They are talking about giving one's life away for some purpose beyond oneself that, paradoxically, results in a gain. As Christians we would call that the reward of the righteous.

And it is a charge as relevant today, as it was for those first apostles. There is both a challenge and a comfort in that reality.

Amen.