

**SERMON 13TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY
TIME 2017 YEAR A**

In 1959 a film burst on to the scene that became an instant classic. Its title was Ben-Hur, an epic starring Charlton Heston as Ben-Hur. The character Ben-Hur is a wealthy prince and merchant in [Jerusalem](#) who is enslaved by the Romans, only to be freed later and return home to claim his family and life. There are many powerful scenes in the film, but one of the most memorable is when Ben-Hur, after been driven as a slave through the desert is in desperate need of water.

The Centurions guarding him however won't allow it. But when Ben-Hur thinks all is lost and cries 'God help me' a stranger approaches. This stranger then proceeds to offer water to Ben-Hur. Who is this compassionate stranger we ask? We do not see his face, but somehow we know this man is no ordinary stranger, this is Jesus of Nazareth. Who, without any words offers a cold drink to a thirsty man. In the

ultimate sign of hospitality Ben-Hur's thirst is quenched and he is able to proceed on his journey. A simple, yet powerful act.

And as we ponder our Gospel reading together this morning, we too are confronted with a series of simple, yet powerful acts. The first is that of *hospitality*, the second, like the scene from Ben-Hur, *a simple cup of cold water*.

So firstly, the act of hospitality. This would have been fundamental to those first disciples. They were moving into an unknown future. They did not know how this new message of Jesus of Nazareth was going to be received. They perhaps had an inclining that it was going to be a message that would cause conflict, as Jesus' words from Matthew last week, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.'

A daunting proposition indeed. These men were to be representatives of this message which brought division. They were to be as servants following their master. For them the message and the messenger were to be intimately connected. They were told ‘Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.’

The second simple, yet powerful act is a lot more explicit. ‘Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’ Again, this would have been a significant message to Jesus’ first followers. Most of them were simple men, of simple means. In the eyes of the world they were insignificant. What impact could they have on the world they pondered? Is the practical small action of the giving of a glass of water really going to change the world around them? These questions would have troubled those early disciples in the same way they trouble us today.

For we too have to ponder the simple actions that the today’s Gospel details, namely those of hospitality and the practical giving of a glass of cold water. For to what degree is hospitality itself an indication of discipleship for us as Christians? There is no ignoring that hospitality has become an important theme in modern theology.

One of the most famous books of the 20th century was Henri Nouwen’s ‘Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life.’ In this book he titles one of his chapters ‘Reaching out to our fellow human beings: the second movement: From hostility to hospitality.’ For Nouwen hospitality was the one of the primary actions of the spiritual life. And he is very explicit about what this sort of hospitality looks like. He writes:

“Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and

women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.” – *Reach out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*.

And so we recognise from such wise sages as Henri Nouwen that hospitality is an important part of discipleship.

And in connection to our second action of the giving of the glass of water, it is in fact often a practical hospitality that is most significant. The church has tended to raise those in leadership or the clergy to great heights, often forgetting the simple service of the majority. Jesus’ words today encourage us that the simplest and smallest of actions can in fact have the biggest impact. The serving of morning tea, the cleaning of linen, the leading of prayers. All these simple yet practical actions are just as important as the larger, grander gestures of the church’s influence in the world.

Therefore to understand God's mission, and how the church reflects that mission, we need to celebrate the cupbearers of cold water. Those who hospitably

receive the Lord's messengers may be just as influential if not more so in the spreading of God's Kingdom. "None of these," Jesus tells us, "will lose their reward" (10:42).

And so Jesus concludes his mission instructions with an implied invitation to all those "anonymous" saints who occupy our churches: you may not be the ones going, but never forget you too are sent. For you never know when you too might meet the thirsty traveller in need of water, and become the stranger that offers them sustenance, and more importantly hope for the future journey.