

Pentecost 5, Year A

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

Many years ago, before she moved to Switzerland, my daughter Melanie lived and worked in Manchester. She was good at her job and one day she went to her boss and asked for a pay rise. “Why do you want a pay rise Melanie?” “I want to be paid the same as my male colleagues doing an equivalent job.” Her request was turned down.

But we do have an expectation that there will be appropriate wages or reward for work done, don't we? And this idea is behind Jesus's words in our gospel reading today where the Greek word for “reward” is *misthos* meaning wages.

LET US PRAY

Years before Melanie was born I was in a church house group with godly people with whom I am still friends today. One of them, Jeanette, had real problems with Jesus saying, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:20), *“store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”*

She didn't think that consideration of what we might get out of being a Christian – beyond salvation that is – should be part of our motivation.

Jesus clearly thought differently. Although it is not as simple as taking the four verses of our gospel reading out of context as we shall see. Paul didn't agree with Jeanette either. He taught in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) that each person will be rewarded according to the quality of their building on the foundation of faith in Jesus. So be careful how you build! It is not salvation that is at stake here; it is salvation plus.

So, reward as a motivation is biblical. And this passage in Matthew is about receiving as much as it is about building.

Jesus says, *“Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.”*

What does Jesus mean, and why does he say it? What is a prophet? Well, a prophet in this context is wider being someone who has the Holy Spirit gift of prophecy.

It is anyone who speaks out a message from God. And righteous is *dikaios*, literally *approved by God*. So a righteous person is one whose conduct aligns with God's standards; one who is approved by God.

Theologian Johann Bengel put it like this: "A prophet is one who speaks, a righteous man one who acts, in the name of God."

Of course, the ultimate prophet, the ultimate righteous man is Jesus himself. If we welcome Jesus into our lives there is a reward. What is it? Well, it is God himself.

*"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."*

Isn't that amazing? Think about it. We tend to take it for granted, don't we? Salvation that is. But just think. Salvation means God with us, Jesus in us, Jesus's righteousness ours, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:21) *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. We are righteous with Jesus's perfect righteousness. Holy Spirit fruit, Holy Spirit gifts, Holy Spirit pouring God's love into our hearts, Holy Spirit power – in us!

Paul's words about being rewarded for how we build indicate that a prophet's reward, a righteous man's reward, is on top of our reward of God himself, of Christ in us. It is treasure in heaven, stored up for a future time.

But why does Jesus talk about it at all? This is not a random floating sentence in Matthew's gospel. It follows Jesus sending out the twelve disciples to preach the gospel, heal the sick and raise the dead – proclamation and righteousness if you like - with a warning that they might be rejected.

This is followed in Matthew by Jesus expanding on the theme of rejection – stern warnings - sheep among wolves, betrayal, hatred, persecution, fear of death. This is the context in which we find our gospel reading today. It is the other side of the coin. The apostles, including Paul, faced all these things. Persecution on the one hand but the anticipation of treasure and reward on the other.

Jesus says *“Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward.”*

So is Jesus saying that we should welcome home for Sunday lunch the preacher who faithfully preaches the word of God, or assess an individual’s moral standing before entertaining them? Hardly.

No, Jesus is, I think, saying that honouring the speaker of a word from God by receiving it to act upon it, brings a reward. Similarly recognising and honouring a person – not necessarily a Christian – exhibiting righteousness brings a reward. Such simple things to do. They should really be automatic once we are in the habit of looking out for them. Automatic or not they bring a reward, a wage, a pay off. Amazing.

So far, we have thought about receiving a prophet as a prophet and a righteous person as a righteous person. But what about not just receiving but building?

Doing – building - is the context in which Jesus spoke these words.

The twelve were sent out to proclaim, *“The kingdom of heaven has come near”* and *to heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons*. Proclamation and acts of righteousness.

If the twelve had gone out but failed to do what Jesus asked they would have denied people the opportunity to welcome them and receive a prophet’s and a righteous person’s reward.

And us? Failure to speak or act on our part would do the same.

So, what does being a prophet in West Linton look like? I think it looks like someone walking close to God, hearing the word he would give for a neighbour, or someone met in the street. It is to offer to pray for a need, maybe right then and there, or perhaps encourage someone to pray themselves by giving them a Try Praying book?

Sometimes it will be to proclaim the love of God in Jesus. Whatever, it is to be an ambassador for Jesus as Paul writes (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

To be honest, we are not very good at this are we?

Don't we focus all too often on the discomfort of speaking out the good news of Jesus, or on probable rejection to the point that we often avoid doing it? But really, how hard can it be if we walk with God?

What about acts of righteousness? What do they look like? Well, quite simply, they look like love.

No doubt we already look out for our neighbour, give generously, do random acts of kindness as they occur... We are not bad at acts of righteousness. At least some. Not so good at healing the sick and raising the dead, to be fair. Perhaps we can do more?

Whatever we do we can give people the opportunity to welcome Jesus. Jesus, who says *"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."*

So, I want to finish with a story I heard recently. It's about a small boy who decided one day that he wanted to meet God. So, he packed his lunch - two cans of Iron-Bru and two Mars bars - and set out for the park. In the park he saw a bench with an old man sat at one end, not doing anything, just sitting. So, the boy sat at the other end, not doing anything, just sitting.

After a while the boy got thirsty, so he opened one of his cans of Iron-Bru and started drinking it. Then he thought that the old man might be thirsty too and gave him the other can.

The man accepted this readily with the biggest smile on his face. And they sat there. After a while the boy got hungry, so he got out a Mars bar.

Then he thought about the lovely smile on the man's face so gave him the other Mars bar. The smile got even broader. And the two of them continued to sit on the bench not saying anything, just smiling.

Eventually it was time for the boy to go home, "What did you do today?" asked his mother. "I met God in the park" said the boy "and he has the biggest smile I have ever seen."

The old man too went home. “What did you do today?” asked his son. “I met God in the park” the man said, “But you know, I didn’t expect him to be so young.”

We too can give others the opportunity to welcome Jesus, both with our words and with our actions.

Amen

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