

Sermon for Sunday 14 June 2026

Romans 5: 1-8 | Matthew 5-10.8

"The Cost of Welcome..."

Preacher: Canon Nitano Muller

*God of generous welcome,
speak to us now through your word,
that our compassion may be deepened,
our hospitality widened,
and our lives conformed to Christ;
in whose name we pray. **Amen***

Introduction:

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them." (Matthew 9.36)

This past week, on 8 June, I marked two years since arriving in Coventry and beginning my ministry here. Can you believe such a thing? And like many things, anniversaries invite reflection. They encourage us to look back, to take stock and to ask what we have learned along the way.

As far as I know, I remain the only Canon in the Church of England with the word *Welcome* in my official job title.

People often smile when they hear that and for a number of reasons. Firstly, *Welcome* sounds rather pleasant. It conjures images of open doors, warm handshakes, friendly stewards, and cups of tea. It sounds gentle, uncomplicated, almost effortless.

Secondly, for those not familiar with the Church or organised religion, I sound like a customer services manager.

Yet the longer I spend in this ministry, the more convinced I become that hospitality is among the most demanding tasks entrusted to the Church.

For hospitality is not simply about receiving those who are already comfortable among us. It is not about welcoming people who think as we think, live as we live, or fit neatly into the communities we have already built. Hospitality begins when we encounter difference. It begins when we are asked to make room. It begins when the presence of another person stretches us beyond our comfort and invites us into a wider understanding of God's grace.

Hospitality sounds easy until the guest arrives.

Then it becomes costly.

That cost lies at the heart of today's Gospel.

Matthew tells us that Jesus looked upon the crowds and was moved with compassion for them. Jesus was not evaluating or counting them. He was not measuring their usefulness or their worth. He saw them as they were: and the gospel writer uses very visceral language: “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

That strikes me as particularly important in an age increasingly fascinated by numbers. We seem obsessed with metrics and measurements. Churches count attendance. Governments count migrants. Businesses count profits. Social media counts followers. Public life increasingly reduces human beings to statistics, categories and data points.

Yet Jesus does not begin with numbers.

He begins with compassion.

Jesus recognises that the crowds are not a problem to solve. They are people to love.

And from that compassion flows everything else. The gospel reminds us that mission of the Church is not born from anxiety about institutional survival. It is born from God's love for humanity.

That is why I find it so striking that, as Jesus sends out the Twelve, he speaks of hospitality. He instructs them to enter homes: to receive welcome and to offer peace. The kingdom of God advances through relationships, through generosity, through tables shared and doors opened.

And then comes a curious detail that is easy to miss.

As Jesus warns his disciples that some places will reject them, he invokes Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is the only recorded occasion in the Gospels where Jesus himself directly refers to Sodom and Gomorrah.

The only time and that matters.

Particularly during Pride Month.

For many LGBTQIA+ people, Sodom and Gomorrah is the ancient story and text that has often been used against them. A passage repeatedly deployed as a weapon of exclusion. A story invoked to justify rejection rather than understanding.

Yet when Jesus mentions Sodom, he does so in the context of hospitality and welcome.

Indeed, throughout Scripture, Sodom becomes a symbol not simply of individual sin but of collective failure.

The sin of Sodom was a refusal to recognise the humanity of those who stood at its gates. It was arrogance. It was the abuse of power. It was the failure to welcome the stranger. It was the inability to see the image of God in those who were different.

The story becomes not a warning about difference but a warning about what happens when fear overcomes hospitality.

And perhaps that warning feels remarkably contemporary.

Across much of the world we are witnessing a growing suspicion of the stranger. We see it in Britain and Scotland. We see it in the United States. We see it throughout Europe. We see it, painfully, in South Africa, the country of my birth.

I confess that I am deeply troubled by some of what I see on the news. Across parts of South Africa, migrants from elsewhere on the African continent have increasingly become targets of hostility and resentment. Families who have built lives and businesses over many years find themselves threatened. Communities are fractured. People who have come to call South Africa home are told they do not belong.

Of course, immigration raises real and difficult questions. Nations have legitimate responsibilities to maintain secure borders and fair systems of law. Illegal immigration presents genuine challenges and must be dealt with.

But beneath those challenges lies a deeper question.

How do we see the person standing before us?

Do we first see a category, a problem, a threat?

Or do we see a fellow human being?

A child of God?

Someone carrying hopes and fears not unlike our own?

People rarely leave home lightly. Behind every immigration statistic lies a story. A family. A loss. A longing. A dream.

And Christians, of all people, should understand this. Our Scriptures are filled with migrants, exiles, refugees and strangers. We have heard over these last weeks of how Abraham leaves his homeland. The Israelites wanders in the wilderness. Ruth crosses borders in search of a future. The Holy Family flees into Egypt. Again and again, God's people are reminded to remember the stranger because they themselves were once strangers.

This does not provide easy political answers. Faithful Christians may disagree about policy. But the Gospel insists that our starting point must be compassion rather than fear.

That is a difficult challenge.

Not least because hospitality costs.

It costs time. It costs energy. It costs certainty. It requires us to relinquish the illusion that our comfort is the highest good.

That is true for churches as much as it is for nations.

If our welcome never stretches us, never inconveniences us, never asks anything of us, then it is worth asking whether it is truly Christian welcome at all.

And boy oh boy is it costing us. Ask anyone who works and volunteers here at the Cathedral. Ask our welcome team or any of our chaplains. We are stretched. And I do not mention it for any accolades or sympathy. I say it because it reminds us of who and what we are.

For the welcome of God is extravagantly generous.

It crosses boundaries. Unsettles assumptions. Constantly widens the circle.

I suspect that is why people love Paddington Bear. I knew of Paddington long before I came to the UK.

Paddington arrives carrying little more than hope, a suitcase, and a label around his neck asking someone to look after him.

He is, at heart, a migrant.

A stranger.

Someone from elsewhere seeking a home.

The genius of those stories is that they remind us that the stranger is never simply a stranger. The person who arrives from somewhere else may become a friend, a neighbour, even a blessing. The very people we are tempted to fear are often those through whom our communities are enriched.

The Gospel simply takes that insight and pushes it further.

It asks us to imagine that every person we meet bears the image of God.

Every person.

Not only those who resemble us.

Not only those with whom we agree.

Not only those whom we find easy to love.

Every person.

Your difficult mother-in-law, that colleague at work, the nosy neighbour.

This is where Paul's words to the Romans become so important. Paul reminds us that Christ died for us while we were still weak. Before we had earned anything. Before we had proved ourselves worthy. Before we had become acceptable.

God's love always comes first.

And because it comes first, it is costly.

Paul speaks of suffering producing endurance, endurance producing character, and character producing hope.

Paul is not celebrating suffering for its own sake. Rather, he recognises that faithful love always demands something of us.

The Cross itself tells us that.

Love costs.

Hospitality costs.

Reconciliation costs.

Welcome costs.

But these costs are not signs of failure. They are signs that we are walking the way of Christ.

As I reflect on these past two years in Coventry, I find myself increasingly convinced that the future of the Church will not be determined primarily by attendance statistics, or how many have given their life to Christ, our strategic plans or institutional structures. Important though those things may be, they are not the heart of the matter.

The question is whether people encounter among us something of the compassion of Christ.

Whether they find a community where they are seen.

Whether they discover that their dignity is honoured.

Whether they encounter a welcome that reflects the generous welcome of God.

The Gospel is, ultimately, the story of a God who keeps widening the circle.

And every generation discovers that the circle is wider than they imagined.

The challenge before us is whether we will allow God's welcome to stretch us beyond our comfort, beyond our assumptions, beyond our fears.

For when Jesus looked upon the crowds, he did not see categories.

He did not see problems.

He did not see statistics.

He saw beloved people.

And he was moved with compassion.

May that same compassion move us.

May it deepen our hospitality.

May it strengthen our courage.

And may it lead us ever more fully into the costly, joyful, transformative welcome of God.

Amen.

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A Cross of Nails is given to new partners and friends of the Community of the Cross of Nails as a symbol of their sharing together with us in the ministry of reconciliation, and to new ICONS schools.

The President blesses the Cross of Nails with these words

Eternal God, you have come among us in Christ to reconcile the world to yourself, and have entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. Strengthen all who work for the healing of conflict and pain amongst your human family. Bless all those at:

INSERT NAME,

who, inspired by the Cross of Nails, bear witness to the grace and truth of your crucified and risen Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

In the name of God,
who has created all people for friendship with himself;
in the name of Jesus Christ,
who commanded us to love our enemies;
in the name of our Lord the Spirit,
who rescues and restores us in peace;
we send this Cross of Nails to

INSERT NAME,

as a symbol of our partnership in the work of reconciliation;
for the glory of God
and the coming of his kingdom of justice and peace.
Amen.