

Theme: 'Welcome to all'

You have heard it said, hate your enemies, but now say unto you 'love your enemies'... There have been some momentous moments of enemies meeting and greeting in world history. In South Africa after spending 27 years in prison Nelson Mandela is welcomed and embraced by long time enemy President PW Botha.

In Israel the Palestinian Liberation Organisation Leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin sworn enemies... meet and greet. You have heard it said, hate your enemies, but now say unto you 'love your enemies'...

In Northern Ireland the terrorist and IRA - political wing leader Jerry Adams is met by and greeted by Prince Charles.

And then, during the First World War there was that most astonishing meeting and greeting ever, where warring enemies left their trenches, abandoning their war, to meet and greet each other in no man's land. They exchanged gifts together and even played a game of football together and - in the middle of war - peace broke out. There have been momentous moments of enemies meeting and greeting in world history.

Think of your own meetings and greetings?

When have you followed Jesus' way of extending a welcome to an enemy, wither those you grew up hating or those you had fallen out with? You have heard 'what was said' all too loud and clear, but have you heard what Jesus now says unto you regarding your enemy?

I remember a most wonderful meeting and greeting. It was some 15 years ago this August when we arrived in Australia. The move to Australia for Catherine, our three boys, and me was a momentous move. We were met and greeted by half a dozen folk from the Morisset Uniting Church congregation who came down to Sydney to greet us off the plane. It was 'a meeting and greeting' in Jesus name that we will never forget.

Greetings can be exaggerated in some churches and when this happens visitors can feel uncomfortable. Sometimes visitors can feel smothered. But where there is genuine, heartfelt warmth of welcome by a church to a visitor it is not only special but it is unforgettable. We assume everyone knows where to sit when they enter the church, when to stand and when to be seated.

Who would feel uncomfortable entering a church?

Who would you be uncomfortable to see in your church... a Samaritan, or Jerry Adams, or your warring enemy, and how would you reveal Jesus' welcome to them?

Parents make inquiries regarding baptism and many have never been in a church before: you can sense their awkwardness and their uncomfortability. Some no doubt wish that a celebrant had been sought with no need for them to come to a church.

What I particularly like about people who do not want a religious ceremony, who don't want to see a minister or priest, and who anticipate the worst, is when they are surprised by warmth of welcome, extended arm in greeting and pleasure at having them present. I get to see the surprise and wide-eyed bewilderment that it's nothing like as bad as they had anticipated and on the contrary they get to feel God's own welcome.

Some expect no warmth of welcome and only expect condemnation. Jesus surprises us all with grace, by delight at seeing us. People have heard it said that he would hate them; would reject them, but Jesus says unto them, “welcome”.

See how Jesus greets us. This is often not what people anticipate. Jesus sends us into the world to break down the barriers: to welcome the unwelcome, to reach out to the untouchables, and to embrace our enemies.

The loving welcome that Jesus reveals means that the default position for Jesus’ followers is not rejection or division or enmity, but forgiveness, welcome, embrace and unity. When you are inclined to judge and condemn, ready to turn your back on someone... then listened to what Jesus’ now says unto you?

Following Jesus’ way is where you don’t just pray “forgive me my trespasses” but in the Jesus now I say unto you way, you pray, “*forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me...*” What a different tone that is, what a different religious practice that is, what a different church that would be. In this way you actually practice Jesus’ way of forgiveness: not in word but in action.

The afflicted are *cursed by God* as you have heard it said, they are afflicted because of their sin: but Jesus now says unto you that God is with them. No longer are you to cross the road to avoid them. Following Jesus’ way you are to reach out to them.

You have heard it said that you must maintain the barriers between you and the Samaritans, between you and the IRA, between you and your enemy, but Jesus now says unto you “love your neighbour.” Breaking down barriers that divide us is the Jesus way.

You have heard it said “kill the infidel among you”, but now I say unto you put your sword away this is not my way, for “those who live by the sword will die by the sword.”

Jesus reveals a new vision of God; a new way of practicing faith; a new way of being God’s people. You have heard it said, but now listen to what Jesus says unto you...