

On Wednesday evening I ate supper with the architect team before they met with the our congregation about the new church on Kennedy Rd. They asked me to find a restaurant to meet in. I decided, after a lot of research, on "Seatown West Indian Restaurant", on Eglinton west of Kennedy. I got there first and everyone in the place was focused on the TV screens where it was Portugal vs Spain in the final minutes of the shoot out. I was in clerical collar and I didn't know what sort of reception I would get. People at the bar turned around to look at me, and someone said. "Oh, look! Someone called in extra help for their team!" I had wondered about bringing "downtown" architects into a store-front Caribbean restaurant. I wondered if everyone would be OK with each other. I felt I was taking a risk.

There is a lot of risk taking in today's Gospel story. It's a risk to ask a passing preacher to be your acutely ill daughter's last hope. It is a big risk to come into a crowd of regular people, when you are deemed "unclean" by Jewish law, and then touch a "holy man". It is a lot of risk to walk up to a dead girl and tell her to get up.

Shortly after Lucy and I arrived as new immigrants in Canada, we began to help people who were refugees in Montreal. They came to Canada, with almost nothing but a bag each, because they had been told that Canada was a place of peace and justice and safety. Refugees ache for home, for friends and family, and that pain balances against the huge relief of fear and horror. They fled with family and friends disappearing, and bodies were found, and knew they, and spouse, and children were on the list. They came, risking everything on a chance of a new life.

I think the Gospel speaks to all of these experiences. This is a Gospel about risk, and fear, and hope. Yes, always about hope.

Back in the Seatown Restaurant there was friendly laughter at my introduction, and I went and talked with the man who had hailed me. I heard about the game so far, and who he was supporting. Anyone from England can get involved in a soccer game in less than 20 seconds, so I was happy to groan and cheer as the ball went into the net or didn't. The Larkin team arrived and joined me at the bar. We got a drink and looked at menus. Suddenly the game was won (Spain) and the place relaxed into small groups of men in conversation at tables. We sat at a table and ate really super-good food and I felt right at home, and no one seemed anything but comfortable too.

What I experienced at Seatown, for myself and for everyone, was acceptance. Race, age, dress style, clergy collar was all there for anyone to see in each other. It was a mixed bag. But no one seemed to be interested in friends and enemies, us and them, or any other big distinction. I was welcomed. It mattered to me. I noticed it. I was thankful. My risk had been a safe one. I had hoped that this was how it would work out. It did.

My experience in Montreal was similar. Lots of people say that Montrealers hate the English. Well, we were fresh off the boat English. We gave French our best shot, but it was rarely good enough to get through ordering a meal or a bus ride. People helped us, laughed with us, welcomed us. We watched the refugee community welcome new refugees, regardless of where they came from, and we saw the French and English Canadians find them homes, support and legal help.

Returning to the Gospel I want to pull out this theme of welcome, of safety, of risk being taken and help found. Whenever we look at the life of Jesus, as it is told in the Gospel, we should be looking for what is shown about how Jesus reacts, what his personality is like, and what is operational style is like. If Jesus is *the image of the unseen God*, as Paul puts it, then whatever is deeply true of Jesus is also deeply true about God the Father.

Again and again Jesus welcomes the outsider, the one everyone has written off. He extends his care beyond his own people to foreigners, to the untouchables, to the scared and the shifty. He opens his hands and his heart to the failed, the bad and the broken.

The nice thing about being a long-term member of a church, a big family, a community or a club is that you do feel welcomed, accepted, loved and safe. We can forget that it is often cold and lonely "out there". We can forget that people end up as outcasts, but ache in their hearts to be included in the warm glow of community and friendship. What Jesus does, in theological terms, is that he returns people into the community of God's love. He effectively says, "You are worthy of being loved by God, no matter what anyone else says. He is your father too, and he knows and loves you in spite of anything you may have done!"

There have been times in my life when I have not felt that. There have been periods when I felt the outsider, the unwanted or friendless one. There have been times when I have felt useless, not worthy of love and unwelcomed, closed out of the warm circle of friends.

It was in such a period of feeling very alone and far from home that this part of the Good News of Jesus became real to me. I was putting on a good show of looking OK, but inside I was scared and lost. I was reading the Bible, the Gospels, and I experienced a strange thing. It was as if, every now and then, as I “watched” Jesus talk to people, he would turn, look through the “lens”, and speak to **me!** There is more to tell of this story, but what was at its centre was that I knew, absolutely knew, beyond shadow of a doubt, that Jesus knew me. Not only knew me, but loved me. And loved me without any hesitation, or condition or demand. There was nothing between me and God. We were as one, in that love.

When that happens you suddenly have a community. You can walk into a church on a Sunday, and you are with “your people”. These are people who know that they too are loved, valued, welcomed, honoured, accepted warts-and-all. They are children of the heavenly Father, part of the family of Jesus, like you.

Before I could reach out to touch the hand Jesus offered me, he asked me, “David, will you give me your life?” I am by nature independent, cautious and resistant to joining things. I am more of a solitary than a crowd person. What would that mean? What freedoms would I lose? What would it cost? Everything? I faced my own risk. Then I said, a few days later, “Yes”. And I have never felt alone since, nor will I ever, even in death. I know this better than anything else that I know.

It is the job of the Church to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. That is not about being a pious huddle, or an Anglo club, or a historical society, or anything else. It is to live in all places of your life as if it were the kingdom of heaven in full reality. In the kingdom of heaven the lost are offered a home, the fearful are shown safety, the sick are made well, the discarded are valued, the broken are helped to be remade, the stranger is welcomed as if they were the Lord, the things which divide us in society are ignored and the strongest stoops the lowest to lift the weakest up.

Why I am growing to really like Scarborough is that I get the feeling that Seatown Restaurant may not be an exception, but a pattern of welcome. Why I get teary singing “O Canada” is that I see here a country that urges immigrants to cherish their heritages but put away their old tribal fighting, their home country’s petty quarrels and their foolish human need to tell themselves that their group is better than another group. Canadian immigration and identity is all about practicing welcome.

Scarborough in a local way, Canada in a big way, and us in a very particular way are called to build the Kingdom of Heaven. “Welcome”, though not all of it, is a big part of it, as the Gospel demonstrates.

What you believe in your faith you need to practice in your life. It is a truth of the Spiritual Tradition that what you practice in your life affects the depth and reality of what you believe in your heart. What is inside affects what is outside, and vice versa.

If you know you are loved by God without qualification, then try to be at least kind to others. Then the kindness of God will settle more fully in you.

As you have received from God, give to others. And you will find that what you received once becomes, not a memory, but a daily reality.

What risk you have taken for God, or what pain God rescued you from, look out for in others, and offer to them what God offered to you. And you will come to find that gift expand in your heart.

Once we reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe, unworthy, we thought ourselves, to touch more. Once we asked for help, desperate and hopeless. We were welcomed, healed and raised to new life. Now it is our job, in restaurants and offices and bus stops, to reach out to others and know they are worthy. We can hold out healing and welcome to the desperate, the refugee the immigrant, the lonely and the broken hearted, and we can offer new life to those whose life has become worthless. And in so doing, we build the kingdom of heaven. We are Christians and we are Canadians. This is all good.