

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

I suspect that whatever the result on 18 September, there will be a renewed focus on the signs at our borders and airports that declare *Welcome to Scotland*. One of the first things that people see when they arrive somewhere new is often a welcome sign, an indication that they've arrived in a particular place. That can be true for countries, for regions or towns or, indeed for particular buildings. The message is – this is where you've arrived and we're pleased to see you.

Now clearly there are political agendas here which we'll lay aside, but let's think about what else might be going on. What does it mean for us to welcome? To welcome people into our country, into our homes, into our churches, into our lives?

There are many ways in which we might overtly state our intention to welcome.

Those signs at the border, the welcome mat at the front door, the open door – perhaps into a well lit entrance, the welcomers in the porch.... All of these are attempts to say to people - come in, you're welcome here. This isn't a private club.

But are we - as a country or a church or a family really open to all comers? The answer is, of course, no. We may well try to be welcoming to everyone who comes to our door, but we don't always succeed. In different ways, we erect barriers. Sometimes they're physical barriers and sometimes they're metaphorical barriers. But they do the same job - they make it clear that some are more welcome than others. We do that for good reason. There may be people who would be a threat to us or our loved ones or our community or our physical space – and so we make decisions that aim to keep us safe. We're in the business of protection and common sense – in so far as that is possible.

There are also times when we invite and welcome people into our psychological and spiritual space. Times when we make a connection with another person or group of people that is more than an exchange of pleasantries but is an encounter between us in a meaningful way. An encounter that allows us to engage at a deeper and more spiritual level.

Those deeper encounters sometimes come with someone we've just met – perhaps a realization that you feel a very deep connection with someone who only minutes ago was a stranger, and sometimes they come over time as a friendship develops.

There's then a difference between the way we are with people who feel like acquaintances, people with whom we have clear boundaries and the way we are when we feel that we've made deeper and safer connections.

If I'm upset about some thing I might tell an acquaintance who asks that I'm having a bad day whereas I might tell a close friend some of the detail of what's going on for me. Effectively, I welcome the friend into my inner life, sharing something that's important to me and trusting that she or he will respect my confidence. I trust my friend with my information but also with my emotions; I trust that my friend will not use my information against me in any way.

My experience has been that most of the time that is the case and some of the time my trust has been betrayed and I've been hurt. So this kind of welcome also carries with it a risk. We make ourselves vulnerable with some people in a way that we usually avoid with others.

And we take these risks for good reasons – we risk because we know that there is the potential for something to be gained.

So what does this tell us about our spiritual lives and that Gospel instruction to welcome Jesus into our lives – not least because by doing so we welcome the one who sent him. Clearly, to welcome Jesus into our lives we first have to recognize him. To recognize him, we have to look for him. We have to be alert in some way, ready to pick up on the cues and to respond.

In this post Easter season, the church teaches us that we are with the Resurrected Christ. Our faith is built not on Bethlehem or Calvary but on what happened next. We know about the Son of God because he appeared to the disciples – on the Emmaus Road; by the seashore; in the upper room. Our faith becomes an active and living faith when we also allow him to appear to us.

Incarnational theology would say – and forgive me for this simplistic distillation of a theology – incarnational theology essentially says that the risen Christ is present in each and every person we meet.

The risen Christ lives and dwells among us and our task is to encounter him, to recognize him in the other and to welcome him into our lives. If only it were that simple. We've already identified some of the barriers to that. Experience has taught us to protect ourselves, to be risk averse in many situations. Experience has taught most of us to go cautiously, to tiptoe rather than rush.

What we need to find here is some kind of balance. Of course we need to keep ourselves safe, physically and emotionally. Inviting someone with malevolent intent into our lives would be a stupid thing to do – and not a Godly thing. The call to seek that which is of God in each person we meet depends on there being some stability and safety in the encounter. Sadly, in some situations that isn't the case. But let's assume that we're dealing here with people who are not a threat – so far as we can tell. I'm then suggesting that we might take a calculated risk. We might just risk sharing something of ourselves with that person. We might seek a deeper encounter.

All this talk about risk depends on something fundamental – our vulnerability. When we risk we make ourselves vulnerable – physically, emotionally, spiritually – perhaps all three. And when we make ourselves vulnerable we enter into a way of being that Jesus modeled. In the person of Jesus, God became fully human. Jesus experienced the full range of human emotion and experience – and in the most explicit ways we can imagine he made himself vulnerable. If we are serious about following that Jesus, we can't always avoid the risks, we can't always avoid our own vulnerability.

And if we go back to the concept of incarnational theology, we seek to find the Christ in those people we meet – and they seek to find him in us. They are more likely to encounter that Christ like part of each one of us if we are a little bit open, a little bit vulnerable. If we take a calculated risk. That might be an example of genuine welcome – welcome that might just allow us to inadvertently welcome our God.