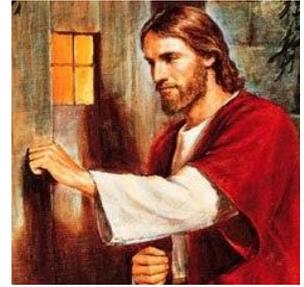


# Welcoming the Stranger



Ron Rolheiser/February 13, 2017/Printed with permission

In the Hebrew Scriptures, that part of the bible we call the *Old Testament*, we find a strong religious challenge to always welcome the stranger, the foreigner. This was emphasized for two reasons: First, because the Jewish people themselves had once been foreigners and immigrants. Their scriptures kept reminding them not to forget that. Second, they believed that God's revelation, most often, comes to us through the stranger, in what's foreign to us. That belief was integral to their faith.

The great prophets developed this much further. They taught that God favors the poor preferentially and that consequently we will be judged, judged religiously, by how we treat the poor. The prophets coined this mantra (still worth memorizing): *The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land; and the quality of justice in the land will always be judged by how orphans, widows, and strangers fare while you are alive.*

*Orphans, widows, and strangers!* That's scriptural code for who, at any given time, are the three most vulnerable groups in society. And the prophets' message didn't go down easy. Rather it was a religious affront to many of the pious at the time who strongly believed that we will be judged religiously and morally by the rigor and strictness of our religious observance. Then, like now, social justice was often religiously marginalized.

But Jesus sides with the Hebrew prophets. For him, God not only makes a preferential option for the poor, but *God is in the poor*. How we treat the poor is how we treat God. Moreover the prophets' mantra, that we will be judged religiously by how we treat the poor, is given a normative expression in Jesus' discourse on the final judgment in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25. We are all familiar, perhaps too familiar, with that text. Jesus, in effect, was answering a question: What will the last judgment be like? What will be the test? How will we be judged?



His answer is stunning and, taken baldly, is perhaps the most challenging text in the Gospels. He tells us that we will be judged, seemingly solely, on the basis of how we treated the poor, that is, on how we have treated the most vulnerable among us. Moreover at one point, he singles out "the stranger", the foreigner, the refugee: "*I was a stranger and you made me welcome ... or ... you never made me welcome.*" We end up on the right or wrong side of God on the basis of how we treat the stranger.

What also needs to be highlighted in this text about the last judgment is that neither group, those who got it right and those who got it wrong, knew what they were doing. Both initially protest: the first by saying: “We didn’t know it was you we were serving” and the second by saying: “Had we known it was you we would have responded.” Both protests, it would seem, are beside the point. In Matthew’s Gospel, mature discipleship doesn’t depend upon us believing that we have it right, it depends only upon us doing it right.

These scriptural principles, I believe, are very apropos today in the face of the refugee and immigrant issues we are facing in the Western world. Today, without doubt, we are facing the biggest humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War. Millions upon millions of people, under unjust persecution and the threat of death, are being driven from their homes and homelands with no place to go and no country or community to receive them. As Christians we may not turn our backs on them or turn them away. If Jesus is to be believed, we will be judged religiously more by how we treat refugees than by whether or not we are going to church. When we stand before God in judgment and say in protest: “When did I see you a stranger and not welcome you?” Our generation is likely to hear: “I was a Syrian refugee, and you did not welcome me.”

This, no doubt, might sound naïve, over-idealistic, and fundamentalist. The issue of refugees and immigrants is both highly sensitive and very complex. Countries have borders that need to be respected and defended, just as its citizens have a right to be protected. Admittedly, there are very real political, social, economic, and security issues that have to be addressed. But, as we, our churches, and our governments, address them we must remain clear on what the scriptures, Jesus, and the social teachings of the church uncompromisingly teach: We are to welcome the stranger, irrespective of inconvenience and even if there are some dangers.

For all sorts of pragmatic reasons, political, social, economic, and security, we can perhaps justify not welcoming the stranger; but we can never justify this on Christian grounds. Not welcoming stranger is antithetical to the very heart of Jesus’ message and makes us too-easily forget that we too once were the outsider.

