

There is a common theme to the first reading and the gospel today, as there often is, and that is showing hospitality and kindness, and the rewards of giving such a welcome. The reward which is promised to the Shunammite woman who welcomes the prophet Elisha foreshadows the promise in the Gospel for those who welcome a prophet, because he is a prophet.

It is a very touching story – the woman is childless, and she offers the prophet a place to stay in her house. He often passes her house on his travels, and she feeds him; but she says to her husband – he’s often here, let’s build him small room on the roof – she recognises him as a holy man. Elisha was one of the most powerful of the prophets and was well known as a miracle worker. This wise woman benefits greatly from her act of kindness and is given the son she longs for.

Jesus’ words in the gospel take this further – he says to his disciples – anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me;

People carry out acts of kindness for all sorts of reasons. And reasons of faith often don’t come into it. Those who do not share our faith are often very kind and generous people.

But when we Christians perform acts of kindness we generally do them because of our faith; we are kind especially to strangers because we see Christ in them.

But this welcome theme is not the only theme contained in the gospel; Jesus also tells his disciples that they must put God first in their lives – their commitment to him is more important than any family ties. This challenge reflects a real situation that Christians found themselves in during a time when they were under persecution – the faith caused division among families, some accepting Jesus as Lord, and others rejecting him – choosing to follow Jesus would have consequences, you put yourself in danger - so often people would be faced with the stark choice between their Christian faith and being rejected by their families. We may not face that stark choice today, but there may be times when we need to put our commitment to our Catholic faith above family commitments.

In fact, Jesus goes even further than this – we must love God even more than our own life – so when it comes to it, that means giving up your life for your faith – the disciples who were listening would in the end be faced with that choice; they chose martyrdom.

How do we link these two themes together: choosing Christ above everything else and performing acts of kindness as a necessary consequence of our faith?

Well in each case there is a choice that has to be made – a good choice or a bad choice – ignoring Christ and our brothers and sisters, or giving of ourselves for them. Yes, the Christian life is about choices.

It might be whether to perform a small act of kindness, or it might be something which has much more serious consequences – a choice which might change the whole direction of our life.

We will face choices every day. Some of them will have major consequences, some will be less momentous. Whatever the level of the choice it is important that we make the right one. We must not make such choices without God, without prayer, without asking the question “What would Jesus want me to do?” So we pray in our Mass that God will be with us in all the choices we have to make, and guide us with his Spirit, so that our lives will be good examples of Christian love and charity, and based on a love for the Lord our God whom we put before everything.