

Hospitality, humility and holiness

Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16; Luke 14.1, 7-14

Whenever I come across today's gospel, I think of the reception I was invited to after one of the first weddings I took as a curate, nearly 40 years ago. It was held at the local rugby club, where the bride's father was chairman. It was very informal, a wonderful serve-yourself salmon buffet, with no place settings, no seating-plan pecking order, no 'high table' to shield bride and groom from their guests. The couple moved freely among us, a diverse group of family and friends drawn together for a day into one body, invited to celebrate their love and hope. It was an experience of hospitality and humility that I'll never forget. I'm sure it would have delighted that shrewd observer of meal-table behaviour, Jesus.

When you are invited to a wedding banquet, said Jesus, see it as an opportunity to practise humility. And do the same whenever you give a luncheon or a dinner. Make sure that you include on your guest list people who could never return your invitation - especially those you keep at a distance: 'the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind'. Take as your model the astonishing hospitality and humility of God's kingdom.

I find myself wondering about the connections between humility and hospitality. I guess humility frees up our imagination so that we can enter into the experiences of others. We call this empathy, and the epistle we've been reading from over the past few weeks is full of it. So today: 'remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them'. 'Don't neglect to show hospitality towards strangers', because in the Bible when Abraham did this, he entertained angels without knowing it. The rule of St Benedict gives strangers in need of food and shelter even more honour than angels. We are to treat them as if they were Christ himself.

Humility and hospitality are the hallmarks of holiness in the Jesus community. What happens, though, when shared life is squeezed? Thirty years ago a Muslim businessman, we'll call him Omar, had a vision of Jesus in a dream. Much to the horror of his family and community Omar converted to Christianity. He left Iran, where he lived, and ended up in Cambridge. In Ridley Hall, where I taught at the time. In the room next to my office. The principal very generously offered Omar a place of safety and support as he worked through the implications of his new-found faith.

I think of Omar whenever I read the letter to the Hebrews. The epistle explores hospitality under pressure. What happens to relationships between faith communities when people move from one to the other: from synagogue to church, and in some cases back again to the synagogue? What happens to humility when hospitality is strained? What becomes of holiness when its hallmarks are disfigured by ostracism and violence?

Humility and hospitality contract when communities feel squeezed. We've all been at receptions after baptisms, weddings and funerals when it's perfectly clear that some would prefer it if others were just not there. And on a bigger scale, humility and

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hospitality almost shrink out of existence when hearts and minds are imbued with a spirit of populism, as we're seeing throughout the world at present, and even on our own doorstep. Reported instances of hate crimes towards members of minority groups have been rising alarmingly since the EU referendum.

The way of Jesus Christ - holiness hallmarked by humility and hospitality - is always challenging, but hopeful too. Benedict's call to see the stranger as if he or she were Christ might sound rash or foolish in a world that encourages us to be suspicious of those we don't know, or keep our distance from people who are different. But this hospitable spirit can only bring out the best in us. Humility and hospitality are determined to make space in the world for the other: for the person or community that is not like us. They present themselves to us as more than angels - as Christ.

What a contrast between this hospitable and humble spirit and the fornication and adultery and financial greed that today's epistle unreservedly condemns. Why? Because these things bring out the worst in us: deceit, meanness, self-absorption, driving us deeper into ourselves, and making any kind of shared life that takes us beyond our own narrow interests less and less likely.

I've been encouraged recently by a Church of Scotland document, and just how different its approach is from its Church of England counterpart. Many of us are confused by the disappearance of certainties we once took for granted in so many areas of life. Humility and hospitality contract when we feel squeezed by confusion and anxiety. We see the world in black and white, and find it hard to rejoice in what the poet Louis MacNiece calls 'the drunkenness of things being various'.

The Church of Scotland document is about pastoral care: [Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care](#). You'll find a link to it on the version of this sermon that appears on the Cathedral website. It's about pastoral responses to those who identify as transgender people. These words come at the end of the report's introduction:

As you go through this booklet, you will not read any academic essays or hear any debates on theological positions; you are just going to meet some people. So get yourself a wee cuppa and settle in and hear about someone else's life.

The document introduces eleven people and their stories. It's a challenging read, but also very moving. It doesn't preach, it simply invites the kind of humility and hospitality of spirit that today's readings commend.

Andrew is one of the people we meet there. He transitioned in his fifties. 'People presume I chose to be a trans man', he says. 'Please believe me when I say that no one chooses to be transgender ... It's not about choosing to be transgender, but to live as your real self'.

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Andrew was well-known in his church, and he acknowledges that he could have moved to another after his transition. But with the help of his minister, he stayed. 'Everybody's been lovely', he says. 'People have got used to it quite quickly. ... For me it's been the difference between life and death'.

The hospitable spirit of Jesus can only bring out the best in us. Humility and hospitality are determined to make space in a confused and confusing world for the other: for the person or community that is not like us. The genius of Benedict is to enable us to see the Andrews and Omars who cross our paths as if they were Christ himself. Why would we not want to meet our Lord in the other as much as in word and sacrament? Pray, then, for the grace we need to make us truly humble, truly hospitable, truly holy.

Canon Dr John Parr

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