

The Hospitality of God – Trinity 11 2022

When I was a vicar both in Kettering and South London my family and I were regularly invited to the local mosque as guests at Eid (al-Fitr), the festival of the Breaking of the Fast at the end of Ramadan. Everyone present would be wearing authentic religious dress or smart clothing, so out of respect I would attend in my cassock and the ladies of my household would wear headscarves. We would nearly always be escorted to a place of honour and served by countless individuals as they brought dish after dish of delicious authentic middle eastern food. The hospitality was profound. Even though we were very different to them, then couldn't have been kinder, friendlier or more inviting. No courtesy was missed. It often occurred to me that this was exactly the kind of hospitality that we see Jesus promoting.

At one of our confirmation classes a few weeks ago, we were exploring what we thought the Church was. We separated our thinking into three sections; community, building and purpose. Our candidates were asked to share their thoughts for each. As we were exploring the Church as community a really special insight was shared. Someone said that 'as a member of the Church community, we each had an individual responsibility to ensure that the church grew and was sustainable long into the future. Our membership of the church was not just for our own gratification and reward, but to ensure that we passed it on through our words and actions.' Jesus makes it clear that hospitality is central to this.

The theologian Mark Oakley says that Jesus is the 'body language of God'. Jesus expresses the wisdom of God through the life he leads. And often his actions speak far louder than his words. Indeed, his silences too. His wisdom is embodied and that is our calling too: to let the Spirit of God dwell in us and speak through us.

Are we a people where God is truly at home?

For many of us today, our homes are private places. We occasionally invite friends or family round for cuppa tea or a meal, but most of the time there is just us and our immediate families. But this is a very recent phenomenon. Go back fifty years or so and it was not uncommon for multiple generations to live in the same house. Grandparents and Great-grandchildren all under the one roof. Often there would be lodgers too. Homes were very busy places. This was certainly true in Jesus' time. The homes Jesus visited and stayed in seemed to

be ordinary homes that already practiced God's hospitality. Once Jesus visited, however, they became anything but ordinary. People flocked into these places to see, hear and touch Jesus. They came to be enlightened, enriched and healed by his ministry. Individuals and societies were changed. But it was not always comfortable. Change rarely is, even if it is for the better.

It could be said that our churches are also called to follow this. To be places of gathering, convening and drawing people of all types into an encounter of God's gracious and proactive hospitality.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus used meals as signs of God's kingdom. Meals where everyone has a place at table and enjoys hospitality and companionship. Meals of shared gifts and common purpose.

In today's reading, we see Jesus taking up an invitation to a sabbath-day meal at the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. He is under intense scrutiny and is being watched intently. As he looks around, he notices how those present have made this meal exclusive. Those invited jostle for a better place higher up the table. This meal reflects their pride rather than their humility.

Jesus explains to them how a meal only becomes a feast when all are welcome and treated equally, when gratitude for being invited outweighs any urge to push others aside. A feast in the proper sense has everything being shared with everyone without limit. A gathering of friendship and hope.

Jesus goes on to highlight how this is all a metaphor for life. Those who exalt themselves end up actually excluding themselves from the shared beauty of the kingdom. A beauty found in collective experience and impartial gathering. A lived experience where we find the wisdom of God indwelling. Such experience transforms and changes us. It is why I cannot be a Christian without going to Church, because only in this diverse community worshipping, praying, feasting together can I be touched by this indwelling wisdom and be transformed by it.

Alone I cannot be challenged and confronted by other's needs and desires. Alone I cannot respond in Christian compassion nor rejoice in other's delight. And of course, this is all a preparation for eternity. Heaven will require nothing less. When we are called to that eternal banquet we can try and elevate ourselves to a place we do not deserve, but we risk our pride forcing us to eat alone in a moth-eaten outhouse. Whereas if we consider ourselves the least

worthy, then we will fit in perfectly with the unending community of the saints in light.

True Christian hospitality ought to make us a little uncomfortable. It shouldn't just be like having a group of friends who are just like us over for dinner. As a member of a truly Christian community, I should be moved out of my comfort zone as I meet God in a gathering of people who are not all like me, but represent the huge variety of characters and views that we see in the world around us. The hospitality that Jesus taught his disciples was one that broke down tribal barriers and overcame divisions of wealth, success, relationship status, gender, class and race. Jesus welcomed all. That is why churches need regular reminding that it is not 'our service' or 'our altar'. It is Jesus' table that we gather around and it is his meal that we share. It is a privilege to receive communion beside the persons we most love as well as the persons that we most loath: to share the blessed cup with the leper as well as the lord. Jesus invites us to live out and practice God's hospitable heart, and he shows us how.

Amen