

## HOSPITALITY, THE HEART OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jeremiah 28. 5-9  
Romans 6. 12-23  
Matthew 10. 40-42

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I don't know how you feel about having guests over, or extending hospitality to others, but sometimes we can find hospitality to be taxing and a drain on our energy and resources. I am reminded of the story about the upper-class woman who was interviewing a prospective servant and asked, 'Can you serve company?' The applicant replied, 'Yes, ma'am, both ways.' The lady looked puzzled and asked, 'What do you mean, both ways?' The servant replied, 'So they'll come again, or stay away.'

At times hospitality is very much like the true story of a woman who had invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, 'Darling, would you like to say grace?' 'I wouldn't know what to say,' the little girl replied. 'Just say what you hear Mummy say,' the mother said. The little girl smiled, bowed her head and prayed, 'Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?'

However we may feel about opening our hearts and our homes to strangers and guests, I believe that hospitality lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. By receiving others, whether it be in public eating places, cafés, or in our own homes, we receive them as we would receive Christ himself. And in giving ourselves to those who come into our lives, we share Christ himself – the one who has sent us – with them.

The appointed gospel text for today is taken from Matthew 10:

‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

These verses come at the end of our Lord’s missionary discourse to his disciples (10. 5-42). Up to this point, and as we saw last week, Jesus has been talking about what the disciples should do and the difficulties that they will face. He frankly tells his disciples what others will do to them because of their witness for him. And at the end of this missionary discourse, Christ teaches them about hospitality in the context of discipleship.

These verses speak of hospitality in terms of receiving and welcoming the stranger, the one who is not known to us. In today’s gospel text, our Lord reminds us of a very profound privilege, and along with that, of a tremendous responsibility. He tells us that we represent and symbolise him before others. And he tells us that the reverse is also true: namely, that others represent and symbolise him before us. Jesus assures us that he himself is present in our lives when we welcome others into our midst. He is also present when others do the same for us.

We bring Christ before others in our homes; in our church; in school; at work; at play; and indeed in the whole world. What would happen if, every day, we were always conscious of this truth and did our best to put it into practice? When we offer and receive hospitality, our Lord is made present. This truly is the most precious gift we could give to anyone.

Most of us probably do not find it too difficult to offer hospitality to our family and friends, but what about the young men noisily playing football in our road, or the difficult neighbour we meet across the back lane, or the fellow worker whose background is very different to ours? How often do we welcome these and similar people who may have fallen through the cracks and who possibly feel rejected? Do we give them the gift of Jesus's presence? Or do we say to ourselves, 'They've got their own people who will look out for them.'

Hospitality is risky business. An open heart and an open home or church may mean that we are a target for unpleasant experiences. But, it can also mean that we are the recipients of unexpected surprises.

One theologian (Kosuke Koyama) was correct when he observed that 'our society, even its religious communities, work on the basis of mutual invitation. Generally, we invite people who speak our own religious and cultural language. But Christ is not enthusiastic about such invitations. The real meaning of hospitality is found in inviting someone who cannot repay us, or someone who is unfamiliar to us. Then the concept of invitation (or hospitality) receives a Christ-related meaning. For Christ is the Hospitality of God towards us. He invites all of us, from all languages and cultures, to his great heavenly banquet, the feast which none of us can repay.'

Christ is God's hospitality toward us. God gives himself fully to us in his Son Jesus Christ. In fact, he did not spare his own life to show us how much he wants us to be with him for all eternity. But God doesn't only give himself fully to us; he also fully *receives us* and accepts us as we are. In Christ, we experience both sides of the coin of God's hospitality toward us.

Church growth experts say that healthy and growing congregations are generally friendly churches that offer hospitality to others. They are churches that live by the principle that ‘there are no strangers here, only friends whom we have not met’.

To be faithful disciples, and to represent God’s heartbeat in our lives, we sometimes need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy. It is understandably hard for many of us, but with God’s help it is not impossible. So, the next time you give or receive hospitality, remember to rejoice in the other person’s presence; remember that it may very well make all the difference in the world to the person who is benefiting from your kindness. And remember that the reverse is also true; that person may be the very presence of Christ for you in an unexpected time and place.

When we give and receive hospitality in the name of Christ, God himself is present there.

It is my fervent prayer and deepest hope that we would grow as a congregation where there are no strangers – only friends that we have not met.

Amen.