

Finding the Delight of Hospitality

21 July 2019

Reading: Luke 10:38-42

The Celtic tradition has these words...

*I met a stranger yest're'een;
I put food in the eating-place,
Drink in the drinking place.
Music in the listening place;
And, in the sacred name of the Trinity,
He blessed myself and my house.
My cattle and my dear ones,*

*And the lark said in her song,
Often often often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise,
Often often often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.*

I can't speak for you but my heart sinks at the thought of offering hospitality. There is just so much to do. Find a time that suits everyone, vacuum, buy food, and cook food. Then there is trying to be nice to the guests. I find my lips saying, "So lovely to see you." but my heart is really saying, "Are you here already?" When they go, I say, "Are you going so soon?" but really I'm thinking, "I wish you had gone sooner." Then there are what my family calls the 'onesies'. You know that any hospitality will only go one way. If we make the effort, they will come but hell would be a very cold place before you ever get an invitation back again.

Luke gives us a story of two people and two different ways of offering hospitality. Strange and wonderful things happen wherever Jesus goes. And today's gospel reading is no exception. We who come to it with modern eyes can miss the radicalness of it. As the passage begins Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. What's unusual about that? In an age when women owned no property this is Martha's home! Also, our modern eyes don't pick up the image of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. Only men sat at the feet of the Rabbi. Luke gives us these details so that we might realize that in Jesus presence women had full equality with men. Luke goes on to contrast Mary's tranquil composure with Martha's busy fussiness. Not content with fussing around Martha blurts out everything, even family secrets, even in front of important guests. Sibling rivalry is full on and Martha even tries to get Jesus to join in on the family fight.

At its most basic this story is a simple lesson in human courtesy; in hospitality. The personality of the guest is more important than any entertainment and attention to the guest is the prime compliment we can pay.

We can get so caught up in the details of the event that we forget to spend time with the guest. Henri Nouwen, as always, puts it best:

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

I think my problem is that I have made the offering of hospitality just too complicated. Jesus said that just glass of water offered in his name is enough.
What a relief. I thought I had to be Mary Berry.

The first testament reading is beautiful. And you might know the icon that has been created to tell its story. A copy of it is hanging in the Cathedral Chapel.

As is the custom of middle eastern people Abraham and Sarah welcome three strangers. They give them what they can, and these three mysterious people offer them a blessing. They offer them their very heart's desire, "This time next year you will have a child." Sarah laughs when she hears it. Christians have looked back on this reading and seen that the three strangers are none other than the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The lesson is clear, when we welcome a stranger into our homes, we welcome none other than God. Martha and Mary knew this. St Benedict also knew this as he wrote in his rule for the brothers...

"When greeting a stranger treat them as if you would Christ himself, bow low before them, nothing is too much trouble for a guest. Even those in rags, indeed especially those in rags."

This is the change of heart I need. When I think about the Christ in those I welcome, I find the energy and life begins to come back into offering hospitality.

At the opening of the preschool we sang our restoration hymn. The chorus of this hymn reads, "All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place." We sang that chorus as we went from room to room with the Bishop blessing each room.

But the good news for St Luke's people is that you have your own room. I put the challenge out there. It is all very well calling it St Peter's Anglican Preschool but one of the rooms needs to be named after St Luke's because you are part of the parish too. I left the decision with the staff. There on the door of my favourite room is the label St Luke's room. It's the sleeping room. I love a good power nap and now I have a room to go and do it! The only problem is that the beds are 3 foot 6 and I'm 6 foot 3. Come and have a look for yourself. You would be made really welcome. And ask to have a power nap in your very own room. Last week I welcomed our local MP and the Imam from the Deans Ave Mosque to have a look around. Sadly, we may get some families from the mosque as they are frightened for their children's' lives at their own preschool.

Abraham and Sarah knew the blessings of hospitality. Martha and Mary discovered it. Benedict and Nouwen did too. Our own Celtic tradition knew it too. The divine comes to us in the stranger, the holy one is present in those we offer hospitality to, and the good news is that the simpler our hospitality the better.

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