

(radical) Hospitality

“First I came here for food. Then I found respect.”

That’s what someone said to me last week, when I asked them about why they’d first come to St Paul’s, and what had made them stay. It was a real encouragement, because in 10 short words, they tapped into something profound about the nature of the hospitality we are trying to offer, here at St Paul’s throughout the week. I say trying, because I’m sure we’re not doing it perfectly! Hospitality is an important concept to keep in mind because it reminds us that we’re not just aiming to provide services – we’re seeking to welcome and honour *people*. People who visit St Paul’s throughout the week aren’t our service users, or clients, they are our guests – or at least that’s what I’ll say for now. So, what is the vision of hospitality that we might aspire to?

The word hospitality as it appears in our English Bibles is a translation of the Greek word *philoxenia*. Reverse those terms and you get *xenophilia* – love of the stranger – the opposite, of course, of *xenophobia*. This is really important: caring for people that are stranger or Other to us is at the heart of hospitality.

In our Old Testament story today, Abraham is a real example of this stranger-loving hospitality. These three men appear suddenly, with no names or contexts, they are archetypal strangers. And Abraham leaps at the opportunity to welcome them! His eagerness jumps off the page, doesn’t it – he *runs* to meet them, he bows and *begs* them to stay, he *hastens* off to get some of the finest food he can offer, “choice” food and a “tender and good” calf. And when it’s time to leave, Abraham walks with them “to set them on their way”, demonstrating that he’s been sincerely glad to welcome them and is sorry to see them go.

Of course, there’s some subtext here about who these men really are. In some interpretations, these men turn out to be angels, explaining their mysterious knowledge about Sarah and Abraham’s future son – and this story is echoed in Paul’s instruction to the Hebrews, to always offer hospitality to strangers, “for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares”. That’s a pretty good reason to be hospitable!

But I was really interested to find while reading up about this passage, that in Jewish thought the relationship between the first two verses of this passage are understood quite differently to how I've personally always read it. The Lord appears to Abraham – and then separately, these three men show up and *interrupt* Abraham's encounter with God! Abraham then says to God, won't you please wait a moment, *then* turns to these strangers and begins to offer his generous hospitality. This gives rise to the rabbinical teaching in the Talmud, that "welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence". That's a maybe surprising, certainly challenging ordering of priorities!

I also wonder whether these two things *have* to be in competition to each other. In the person of Jesus, many of his friends and followers discovered that as they welcomed him as guest, they also encountered something of the divine. If Jesus is resurrected, that is, Jesus is alive in this present world – then what form does that encounter with Jesus take today? Maybe, in the very welcoming of others, we encounter the divine. In other words, we meet God in the face of those we offer our hospitality to. I do genuinely feel I have experienced this around our community meal tables.

If this is true, then it's a challenge. It could be easy to get too comfortable in how we offer hospitality, especially hospitality to those in need – with us securely in the role of helper and them as helped, us as giver and them as receiver, us as host and them as guest. But people made in the image of God deserve more respect for them, and more humility from us, than that. And the story of Zaccheus that we heard today speaks to exactly that, with Jesus totally destabilising that neat host-guest dynamic.

In the set up described, it's really unclear who is the host and who is the guest. It's Zaccheus who's in need of help, who's marginalised and looked down upon by Jewish society, and Jesus is very much the one doing the reaching out, including and inviting. But Jesus, a wandering nomad with no fixed address, invites himself *into Zaccheus' home* as a guest. He probably knows that Zaccheus is wealthy and can well afford to feed him (and his travelling companions too, I imagine). So, at the same time as he recognises the need and lack in Zaccheus, Jesus recognises Zaccheus' abilities and potential too, and he gives Zaccheus an opportunity to be a giver as well as a receiver. This is a hospitality of mutual, reciprocal love.

And what a result! Zaccheus is inspired, maybe we could also say empowered, to give even more of what he has to offer – pledging that very day to redistribute his wealth to the poor and those that he's defrauded. This shows us how important it is to recognise and receive the gifts that others have to offer us, never defining someone solely by what they lack or need. When I think about this I think about Chris, who sleeps rough and comes here on Mondays for food from Fairbite and a hot meal, *and* who turns up an hour early every week because he sets up all the tables and chairs. I think about the beautiful crafts that Sarah designs and teaches the other members of our Thursday Group. I think about how many times I've been humbled by the generosity, endurance, patience or kindness of people experiencing hardship of different sorts.

That was Zaccheus as guest allowed also to give. We can think about this the other way round too – Zaccheus, as *host* allowed also to *receive*, finds himself challenged and changed by the experience. I'm sure in his eagerness to see and host Jesus he didn't expect to find himself giving away all his money as a result. Similarly, I'm sure Sarah and Abraham didn't expect to discover they would be having another son! Offering hospitality that's grounded in reciprocity can challenge us, because we open ourselves up and so risk being changed by the process. We give up a degree of control, but receive abundantly in return. I'd say that the change on Mondays has been a real example of this: from a foodbank session handing out parcels, to a community shop and café where people contribute towards costs, choose their own food items, and spend quality time in conversation, playing board games and making banana bread. There is a vibrancy to the afternoon that wasn't there before, and "guests" meaningfully shape and contribute to the space. That's not always easy, with complex social dynamics to navigate not to mention food hygiene considerations – but it's truly worthwhile. Another way in which we open ourselves up is by sitting round the table together at meals, and lighting candles alongside one another in chapel. There's a real equality and mutuality to doing these things. I challenge myself to try and give a real answer when guests ask me over dinner how I am, because how can I expect that of them if I don't do the same in return?

So: a hospitality grounded in a love for strangers, people who are Other to us in some way. A hospitality with a culture of reciprocity and mutuality. This is a hospitality through

which we are challenged, a hospitality that doesn't always feel comfortable, but which leads us down the path of abundant life. A hospitality through which we build meaningful relationship, meaningful community, with others, and in and through them, with God.

Amen.