

## **Why do we practise Hospitality? John 21: 4-14 and Romans 15: 1-7. 12/3/2023**

I wonder what you think of when you hear the word “hospitality”? For me, it reminds me of when I was at work and the hospitality budget was the pot of money you had to provide visitors with teas and coffees and lunches when they came for meetings. It was often my job to organise this. We had a suite of committee rooms which each had tables outside them where the catering staff would leave the drinks and food until it was needed. On one occasion the meeting I was part of broke for lunch and committee members emerged from the room eagerly awaiting their grub only to find that the table was bare. Frantic calls to Catering ensued but they assured me that they had left our lunch on the table. It transpired that people in the meeting room next door had finished before us and taken our lunch. I was told “well, go and get it back!” so I had to knock on the door, apologise, and explain what had happened. This was made much worse because the people munching through our sandwiches were none other than the Chair of the Agency and members of the Board who were not pleased in having their lunch wrenched from them. It was one of those embarrassing situations which you never forget. And then there were the times during the days of “austerity” when money was tight and the powers that be decided we couldn’t provide teas and coffees for meetings, only water. Not a great welcome for someone who had crossed the country to be there. So you see, the word “hospitality” always makes me feel rather nervous!

Being able to offer a drink and something to eat always helps to provide a warm welcome and a chance to talk in a relaxed atmosphere, but is there another reason we should be hospitable as a church? Is it just a nice thing to do, or is there something more?

Jesus spent quite a lot of time eating and drinking with people. He was even accused of being a glutton. He sat down and ate with the Pharisees. We see him at Martha and Mary’s house where a meal is being prepared. He invited himself to a meal with Zacchaeus. He had supper with the two on the road to Emmaus. He ate the Passover meal with his disciples, and today we heard the story of the breakfast on the beach after his resurrection. And there must have been many more occasions where he ate with both his friends and those who opposed him. Sitting down to eat with someone is a mark of acceptance and it seems Jesus would accept an invitation from anyone.

Acceptance and welcome: both themes that are very topical today. We are grappling with the question of who do we welcome into our country and who do we try to keep out? Who do we welcome into our churches is also a subject for debate in some circles. I saw one notice for a church service which said this: “All are thoroughly welcome regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, disability, economic power, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity or sexuality”. The fact that this needed to be said at all, should make us stop and think. Is it a fact that there are some people we don’t welcome. Do we just welcome people who are “like us”?

In the early days of the church there were contentious issues among church members who had different backgrounds: some were Jews, some were Gentiles. Paul, writing to the Roman church, encourages them to “be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. ... Share with God’s people who are in need, and practise hospitality.” (Chapter 12) So hospitality is not just about being friendly, but about helping those in real need. Much like those who have generously shared their homes with Ukrainians in our day.

Then later in his letter (chapters 14 and 15) he goes into more detail about how to deal with some of the things that are dividing them. He talks about the fact that some of them are happy to eat anything, whilst others have restrictions, for example they won’t eat meat. These practices are based on deeply-held beliefs. (I’m sure there were other things beside food that caused disagreements among them.) Paul’s response is to lay down the following principle: Don’t judge

others. Respect other people's sincerely held beliefs, even if you don't share them. Don't hinder them in their faith.

He acknowledges this can be difficult. You're going to need God's help, he says. (Verse 15:5) "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves ....." because it brings glory to God if those with widely different backgrounds and beliefs live in harmony with one another. Learning to live with other people within the church isn't always easy. We are called to do that, *and* to welcome the stranger too. That might be uncomfortable. We all have different life experiences. We may not share the same beliefs. Paul's argument is summed up in the next verse: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Some translations say, "Welcome one another, as Christ welcomed you." That might sound familiar – it was our verse for the year, last year.

The Greek word he uses for 'accept' or 'welcome' is *proslambanesthai*. There are two other occasions where it is used, that help us to understand it. Firstly, when Paul and his companions are shipwrecked on the island of Malta, they drag themselves ashore, it's raining and cold and the islanders build a fire and welcome them. What a comfort that must have been. The islanders didn't know anything about Paul and the others who were washed ashore from that boat. They didn't immediately ask questions; they just responded with kindness and welcomed them in.

Secondly, Paul uses the word when writing that little letter to Philemon, whose slave Onesimus, somehow or other, has parted company with his master and ended up with Paul. While staying with Paul he has become a Christian. Even though he is very useful to have around, Paul he feels that he should send him back to Philemon and so he writes, urging him to take Onesimus back, not to punish him, but to welcome him back, not as a slave, but as a Christian brother.

So, to accept people with open-hearted kindness is what Paul is encouraging the Roman church to do. And there's a very good reason for this: accept one another, just as Christ accepted you. That should be their motivation.

Love one another, just as I have loved you, Jesus says to his disciples, and again "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away". Jesus sat down and ate with anyone.

This is a characteristic of God himself. Jesus told a parable about a man who prepares a great feast, but all those originally invited make excuses and don't turn up. Who are the people then, sitting around the table? People who thought they would never be invited – the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, and a load of other strangers who were brought in off the streets so that the dinner table would be full. God is the generous host who welcomes all.

I wonder where we see ourselves in that story. Are we the ones who get the first round of invitations? Or are we those who are so astonished, so amazed that the host would ever invite them, that they just can't wipe the smile off their faces for days? Perhaps it is only when we feel that deep gratitude that God accepts us, that we can find a way to accept others.

There are some words we sometimes use in the Communion service that express this so well: "When we turned away, you did not reject us, but came to meet us in your Son. You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you."

It's a joyful picture. God has accepted me. God welcomes me. So that's why in our faltering and feeble way, the Church should reflect the way that God does things. Let us not exclude those whom God would invite, but let us be a place of welcome and acceptance.