



Readings:

Romans 6, verses 12- 23 and Matthew 10, verses 40-42

'There but for the Grace of God go any one of us... giving and receiving hospitality.'

What do you think of when you hear the word hospitality.

You may think of personal hospitality – offering someone a cuppa and so on. Inviting them into your home - you might tidy up, prepare some food, or snacks at least, make sure there's loo roll and turn the tv off. Personal hospitality is about making others feel welcome and comfortable in your space – whatever, wherever that is.

Or you may think of what we now call the service industry.

All the service jobs - flight attendants, front desk in various organisations, pubs and clubs, waiters – the job, in essence, is to make people feel welcome – if only so they'll come again. And pay more money.

We talk about hospitality in church – we have welcomers now whose primary task is to look out for those coming in – make them feel welcome, just like it says on the tin, show them where the loos are, help them navigate the space without overwhelming them with attention – which can be counterproductive - just being aware of others, and being hospitable. The job of a welcomer.

We welcome people through the week, the over 60s club, the welcome café, the regular café now opens every day, Janet, and Debbie, and the caretakers around the building. Lorraine and Robert often here on a Friday – always offering a welcome.

I love that both of our churches are welcoming of baptism families too. – It's not always easy, people we don't know come to our church, and don't know how to behave, why would they – assuming there is a right way to behave - what they're meant to do, how they're meant to dress, when to stand, and we don't wag fingers, but in our words and deeds, we say you're welcome, and we're glad you're here. That's worth being proud of.

And we're working on it some more - we will soon have a welcome pack, you'll all get one when they're launched though eventually they will be for new people in our church family, which will have names, contacts, service details, and all manner of other things including, I'm told, a tea bag.

I think we're a welcoming church and I don't say that to flatter or to humour – if it wasn't true, I wouldn't say it. though there's always lots more to do.

And one thing we can do to help us in our welcome is look back on our first time in this church –

For some that will be relatively recently,

For some it will be years ago.

What do you remember about the welcome you received?

Were you welcomed, how, by who? How did it feel?

(The other day Andrew was telling me how he and Claire were welcomed, and it worked beautifully for them. It's wonderful. It would have had the opposite effect on me. And that's ok. We're individuals - What made you come back a second time – not looking for compliments here, or brick bats. But truth, as well as you can recall it).

You might have returned a second time because of the welcome, or possibly in spite of it. I don't know.

- Welcome matters – so much.

Especially as a Christian – we are called to hospitality. It's almost the heart of who we are – the central celebration of the Christian church is the Eucharist – a meal. And we say, come, join us, eat at this table with us. You're welcome. It's for us all, equally.

And when we welcome others, we welcome Jesus, think of the sheep and goats' passage, from Matthew.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The reading today is actually the other side of that coin.

Not when you welcome others, you welcome me...

But whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.

This passage is about how we receive hospitality. Not give it – but receive it. Do we receive it in a Christ-like way; are we open to the kindness of others, are we willing to be vulnerable as Christ was vulnerable, or do we avoid the Christ like experience by never being vulnerable, never receiving. Only ever giving. Jesus received – love, prayers, friendship, food, shelter.

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.

Can we receive?

Sometimes hospitality is much harder to receive than to give.

Think of the word hospital. Same root meaning as hospitality – to care for, or to be cared for.

Lying in a hospital bed where we are subject to the kindness of strangers. Doctors, nurses, porters. It's hard. Out of control.

The thing about hospitality received is it take control away from us.

When we're the hosts, we get to choose the food for guests, we decide on the room temperature, we know where the loos are, and we can make sure there are loo rolls etc. We do it with our mind on our guests, but we still do it. It's up to us what happens. When we go to someone else's house they decide how comfortable the mattress is, how much the room is heated or not, the radiators are a bit hotter than you like, the tea they serve tastes a bit funny. But you're the guest. Not up to you.

When we receive hospitality, we are out of control. Out of control...

Remember how Jesus told his disciples to go out, two by two, from town to town, to travel without any money or supplies but depend instead on the kindness of strangers.

What if we did that?

He who receives you receives me, and who receives me receives the one who sent me.

Depending on the kindness of strangers.

What if we did that? What if we had to?

Depend on the kindness of strangers.

Imagine - When we went home today, instead of going home, what if our house had suddenly disappeared. All we had was what we brought with us to church this morning. It just wasn't there anymore. we had no choice but to go off into the world, with no money, no plan for where to sleep - no friends? Let's go the whole hog.

Nothing but the clothes you have on your back, and we had to depend on the hospitality of strangers?

How far would we get?

Could you ask for help?

Are you the sort of person who struggles to ask for help?

You've always looked after yourself.

Always got on on your own.

Always believed that was the way it should be.

But now you can't.

Now all those things that gave you that control, that confidence have been taken away.

You can't choose what or when to eat.

You can't choose where to sleep.

You might have to sleep in a very unsafe place, like, maybe, on concrete carpark, outside of a church on Temple Hill.

Who knows?

How many without a second thought would accept the hospitality of a free drink from a stranger. IN an age of date rape, we've learned not to.

But what if we had no choice. What if we were thirsty.

Jesus says, I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.

But what if you were thirsty, and hungry, and wet, and cold.

What if we were the homeless person,

What if we were the one who smelled because we had no access to showers or baths.

What if we were the hungry one, and had to settle for a biscuit, instead of the meal we needed to stay healthy.

And what if it was cold, and dark, and wet.

And tomorrow wasn't going to be any better.

Imagine that scenario, though God willing it will never happen. But as an act of empathy imagine it.

A lost job, a mental collapse, ill health, old age, crazy mortgage repayments, they can all make that secure life disappear.

Sooner or later, like Peter, others will take us where we do not want to go. We all have to depend on the care and expertise of others.

And if we can imagine what it might be like to receive hospitality in those dire conditions, if we can be Christ-like enough to imagine utter vulnerability, the vulnerability of the cross, utter dependence on others, then, when we can give, we might be so much better at it.

There but for the grace of God go I.

He who receives you receives me, and who receives me receives the one who sent me.

God's DNA is in every cell of every human being.

Every human being, made in the image of love, made in the image of God, including you and me, that image so often marred by cruelty, and neglect, and a lack of empathy, sometimes, yes, by bad luck and catalogues of misfortune, but still there. We all deserve love, care, and hospitality – we all need to learn how to receive it. Christ is in the giver. Christ is in the receiver. Every time we give or receive care, there's a kind of preternatural connection between giving and receiving that lights up the kingdom of God. It's here, and here, and here. Not so far away. To receive love is every bit as holy and sacred as to give it.

And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

Amen