

THE CHURCH AND HOSPITALITY

I want to begin today by taking you on a part of Wendy and my journey.

Over the years we have known many blessings from God's hand. Many years ago, He gave us a house. To cut the story very short, friends were moving to Melbourne from Whyalla, and they came to us and said that they believed the Lord wanted us to have their house, and that all we needed to do to have it was to take over their mortgage (which was very small by today's standards). We ended signing the contract with a \$50 deposit!

We felt that that was the Lord's house. It had been a house that a lot of people had been through for meals and staying over, and we continued the tradition. We had already been doing that in our old house, but it seemed to ramp up even more when we shifted. It seemed as though there was no end of people in and through the house, including a young man and young woman, both of whom stayed for about 18 months each. The young man was a skin head and all that went with that. The young woman was engaged and all that went with that! At the same time all this was happening, we had two young children, we were working through whether or not to go to college and Wendy was having major health issues with her back. Once we got through that time and had actually moved to Adelaide for me to take up study, we were not the same in regard to hospitality. It was as though we crammed a lifetime of hospitality into the space of a few years and since then we've been hospitalitied out! It took a lot out of us and we haven't been the same since.

Today we're talking about the church and hospitality. No doubt we're sitting here with a range of thoughts and feelings running through our heads. Some will be thinking how you love hospitality because God has actually given you a gift in that. Others will be wishing I was about to speak about something else because it's an area of tension for a whole range of reasons. Whatever we might think or feel about it, the thing we can't get around is the fact that it's very clear that hospitality is a big thing in the scriptures. It's something that's exhorted of us:

Romans 12:13 (NIV)

¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

1 Peter 4:9 (NIV)

⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
What is it and how do we go about it?

WHAT IS HOSPITALITY?

So far you might be thinking that when I'm speaking about hospitality I'm referring to having people in your home, keeping it in tip top condition and preparing 4 star meals. But it's not about that, although for some of us our homes and meals will be part of it.

- It's more than offering food or a room to someone.
- It's more than being welcoming.
- It's more than something we might do occasionally as and when the mood takes us or we respond to a need.

Welcoming the Stranger

The word literally means "loving or welcoming the stranger". It means opening ourselves to those we don't know, and giving of ourselves and things we may have to them. It is welcoming people into our own space. It is as much about an openness and welcoming of heart and attitude as it is about what we do. Jesus' ministry was itinerant so He didn't have a home to which He could take people, but we see over and over that He did what I've just described.

Who Are the Strangers?

- They may be people we have never previously seen or met, but more often it is likely to be people we see around the place, but simply don't know.
- There are people here today who may be strangers to each other.
- There are people at your workplace who are strangers.
- Your neighbours, who you may see many times during a week, could well be strangers.

So hospitality is welcoming these people into our space.

- Sometimes that will be a physical space such as our home. That will be an important part of hospitality, because there is something very powerful for a person in being welcomed into our home, something that (especially in today's world) is often very private.
- Other times, it might be our emotional space; simply giving of ourselves to people, opening up to them and listening and being attentive to them as they open up to us.

There is no prescription about how we express hospitality; it will mean different things for different people, and it will mean different things at different times through the seasons of life.

The Distinctive Quality of Christian Hospitality

The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it welcomes those who are not normally welcomed.

Luke 14:12-14 (NIV)

¹²Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

We are generally willing to be hospitable to those with whom we feel comfortable. How do we do with those with whom we don't feel comfortable? There are many people whose experience of life is one of fragmentation, loneliness, alienation. Many experience indifference and a lack of welcome. How powerful is it for them to see a community of hospitality, and even more powerful to be invited to share part of that. This is one of the means by which we stand out as a distinctive community. This is the radical and difficult nature of Christian hospitality:

OUR HOSPITALITY BEGINS IN GOD'S HOSPITALITY TO US

Once again, it's important that we get our starting point right. Hospitality doesn't begin in us, it begins in God. Our hospitality is not something we do of ourselves or out of our own resources but it's as we experience His grace and hospitality toward us that it then flows from us to others.

The Hospitality of Jesus

Jesus came into the world which He Himself had created, and even His own did not receive Him.

John 1:11 (NIV)

¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

He received a most inhospitable welcome, but He showed us what the hospitality of the kingdom was all about.

He welcomed the lame, the crippled, the blind and the outcast.

His ultimate hospitality was shown at the cross, where the very bread of life was given for us.

John 6:35 (NIV)

³⁵Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

He gave His life so that people could be welcomed into the kingdom and experience the hospitality of God through His indwelling Spirit. All of which means that we are no longer strangers but family.

Us and Hospitality

Because of how it's sometimes been seen, and because of the way our culture is these days, we tend to see hospitality as something peripheral, something we can take or leave. It's as though we stand back and make a decision as to whether or not we will show hospitality.

We tend to see it as a nice extra if we have the time and resources, but we don't often see it as a spiritual obligation or part of the dynamic of our Christian life and faith. (Jan Croucher)

If we think about hospitality as a duty we have to fulfil and ourselves as the starting point, then it's not going to be easy. It will be fine for those who have the gift, but a real struggle for those for whom hospitality doesn't come easily. What difference would it make if we saw hospitality as something we are i.e. as part of our very nature, the essence of who we are? If the triune God—who is a God of hospitality—is part of us and we of Him through His Spirit, then hospitality is part of who we are as His people. It is not an added extra. It's not something we do as and when it suits, but is part of what it is to be Christian. He will work out its expression in us.

It is as we experience God's hospitality toward us that we are then enabled, equipped and motivated to show hospitality toward others. As we are touched by His grace, and experience His welcome of us, so we are then enabled to welcome others. As we know and experience more of what it is to be enveloped into the fellowship of the Trinity, we are better equipped to express God's hospitality through us, because we will be looking to others instead of ourselves. Our hospitality will become a re-enactment of the hospitality of the kingdom, a foretaste of the kingdom that's to come. To show hospitality is a fundamental expression of the gospel. In our welcoming of people, they actually experience the welcome and hospitality of God. Our work is to ask what it is He wants us to do and to seek His enabling and equipping as we do that.

This is the end of the series that has One Heart and One Mind With God as it's overall theme. We're not finished with the theme; just this series. We said that it's purpose was to lay a foundation for seeking the Lord's direction for us as a church and hopefully it's helped to do that. The letter in today's newsletter outlines where we see things going from here. But, as I said last week, I feel that where we've come at the end is really the crux of it all. It all comes down to being a hospitable community, a place of welcome, family and safety.