

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 21st July 2013 at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle 7.00am
Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-29; Luke 10:38-42

Back in the year 2000, after finishing long service leave, but with a few months left before going to live in community at St John's College, Morpeth, I applied for a casual job delivering the local newspaper. I don't know why because I was paid a pittance for a lot of hard work. But it was good exercise!

I discovered a number of letterboxes with the words written on them in large letters: NO JUNK MAIL! The list of instructions we were given said to ignore those signs because our newspaper isn't junk. But seeing those letters NO JUNK MAIL always made me hesitate. What did succeed in getting me to walk straight past the house as quickly as possible was the sign BEWARE OF DOG!

Other places had high walls and intercoms; then there were those that were open, well-cared for, welcoming and inviting.

I wonder how the church strikes people who enter its doors for the first time. What signs are there (not written ones of course but the unwritten ones) that might turn people away, and what signs of hospitality and welcome are there?

Today's Gospel is a story of hospitality: two unmarried sisters, Mary and Martha, welcome Jesus into their home. And most people know that Mary is the thoughtful one and Martha is the active one. Martha is busy getting into a flap in the kitchen preparing a delicious meal for Jesus, this rabbi, this teacher: it was a bit like having the parish priest or the vicar or the rector over for dinner. (We clergy like the Marthas who do that).

But out in the lounge room, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, which doesn't mean she was being docile or subservient. It was the customary posture for a student – sitting at the feet of the teacher. And students were always men (as were teachers, rabbis). So Mary's sitting as an intelligent student, instead of being in the kitchen where women belonged, was quite revolutionary. She sat in rapt attention, taking in every word Jesus said. (And we clergy like the Marys who do that too).

Hospitality is one of the features of the Christ's followers. Throughout the New Testament the churches are urged to "practise hospitality." And Mary and Martha are doing just that.

In these days of gated communities, sophisticated security and alarm systems, intercoms and fast food, hospitality is fast disappearing. One reason could be that hospitality is risky; it requires exposure, welcoming the stranger into our lives

The nation of Israel was commanded to show hospitality, not only to fellow Jews, but to the stranger, the alien, the foreigner. Deuteronomy 10 says, "Remember you were a stranger and a sojourner and God took you in." Now you do the same.

You remember the story in the book of Genesis when Abraham and Sarah were awoken from their afternoon nap oneday by a knock at the door. And there were three strangers by the Oaks of Mamre.

Sarah made them a meal and the strangers turned out to be angels who blessed Abraham and Sarah for their hospitality.

The letter to the Hebrews urges that we forget not to welcome the stranger because in so doing many have entertained angels unawares.

So hospitality involves meeting the stranger – the one who may make me feel uncomfortable – and welcoming them on my turf, my domain. That's part of the threat. Our world is preoccupied with protecting *our* space, *my* turf; by building walls, barriers and fences and putting up KEEP OUT signs of various kinds.

When Mary and Martha invite Jesus into their home, he not only chats and shares a meal with them, he teaches them. And his teaching may involve things they would rather not hear. That may be true for us too. Jesus may say to us, as he basically did to Martha, "Stop rushing around. Stop criticising others who act differently from you." To show hospitality, to welcome him into our lives is risky because he brings change and upsets the status quo.

So hospitality is risky and makes us nervous because it means change and it means inviting the stranger, the other, the different onto our turf. The other, the stranger is so different, not like us. And this fear drives many of the agendas in our world today. Fear of the one who's different because of race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender and sexuality. The natural tendency is to prefer sameness, similarity – "those like us."

Hospitality is a major way of making room for God in our lives, growing in faith, hope and love and in our understanding of what it means to be the family of God.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that the great test of our faithfulness isn't how much Bible knowledge we have, or our understanding of theories of the atonement, or lobbying to get Christians into Parliament, or growing our church by 10%. The major test is: "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was sick or in prison and you visited me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me in." In short, you showed hospitality.

It is always wonderful to see hospitality being shown to those who come to the community lunches in the Horbury Hunt Hall every other Sunday. And to see the gift shop volunteers welcome people who visit during the week. What about us? Will we make room for the stranger? Not by trying to make them like us, but by giving them space, letting them who they are.

Henri Nouwen, speaking of marriage, suggested that relationships can be like two hands locked in fear. They cling tightly because they can't survive individually. But the tighter they interlock, the more they realise they can't take away each other's loneliness. And then things get tense; there's friction and often a breakup results.

But there's another kind of relationship. It like two hands folded in prayer. The fingertips touch, and the hands create a space, like a little tent. It's a space created by love, not fear. Where others are not

excluded but where an open space allows God's love to be shown to the stranger: the child, the friend, the visitor.

We're here today to meet with Jesus. He invites us to his table. But there's also a way in which in worship, we, like Mary and Martha, Abraham and Sarah, receive Jesus.

A student was working on summer as a volunteer in a Jesuit home for the poor in the inner city. They worked hard, handing out food, ministering to people's needs. One long and difficult day as evening came, this student and an old Jesuit had just finished caring for the last person and were pushing the big oak door closed for the night when they saw one more bedraggled soul shuffling up the path toward the centre. The exhausted student looked at this man and mumbled, "Oh, Jesus Christ!" The old Jesuit said, "Could be, could be. We'd better open the door."

The last book of the Bible hears Christ saying to us, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Revelation 3:20).

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