

## Practicing Hospitality

**Read:** [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#); [Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#)

### Father's Day

I want to begin by offering a few thoughts about fathers on this Father's Day.

We are all daughters or sons of fathers. For some of us, father is an encouraging word ... and conjures up dads who are loving, supportive, strong, adventurous, hardworking and sometimes even funny. For others, the word 'father' may be a wounding word ... whether because their own father was absent or even abusive ...

As a father myself, I need to acknowledge the challenges of fathering well. There are not so many good role models – whether in Scripture or in our culture – yet Jesus encourages us to follow his example and call **God** our Father ... the One who welcomes us into the family of God, the One who gently restores wayward children ... offering grace and mercy and hospitality.

For all of us who are fathers – or who are missing their fathers – or wishing for a different father, may we seek to love others as God our Father loves us, may we recognise the value of our children as God does, and may we learn to ask for help to better serve others.

### Living in another culture

Our readings today, though, do not focus so much on fathers as they do on **hospitality** ...

As a family we've lived interstate or overseas on several occasions. Such a move is always hard at first because you don't know anyone and often the customs are subtly or sometimes substantially different. One of the first places we usually visit is the local church – both to participate in worship but also to try and connect with people. Sometimes the welcome and hospitality is amazing ... like our first Sunday in Perth, for instance, where a family invited us to join them for a BBQ dinner at a local

park – and even came to pick us up from the hotel we were staying in. We felt included from the very beginning.

It's when you've been a stranger living in a foreign place that you appreciate the gift of hospitality more keenly. You also realise that hospitality involves **more** than just being **nice** to people, and offering them a cup of tea or coffee after the service. It also involves listening to their stories and opening your heart to welcome them. Many of us – myself included – have lived most of our lives living among middle-class, respectable Anglo Australians, and if we're honest, we often struggle to truly welcome people who are **different** to us – whether because of the language they speak, their age, their cultural background or their ability.

I think it's one reason why so many Australians are suspicious of aboriginal people or asylum seekers from Asia, Africa or the Middle East. We're not sure how to relate to them and so we keep our distance and fall back on deep-seated or even subconscious prejudices and fears. So rather than embracing these people our tendency is to exclude them out of fear.

#### [Understanding Eastern hospitality \(context\)](#)

The importance of hospitality is much more deeply ingrained within Eastern cultures. We read in the book of Leviticus 19, for instance, this command concerning foreigners:

When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of them.

Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love them like one of your own.

Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Lev 19:33–34)

After escaping from Egypt, Israel became a refugee nation without a home, fed, nurtured and offered hospitality by God in the wilderness. Due to these formative

experiences, Israel is called to deal compassionately with any strangers in their midst and to extend them hospitality, just as God cared for Israel.

In the New Testament, Jesus demonstrates what this looks like by associating with and sharing meals with all sorts of people – a Samaritan woman at the well, tax-collectors like Zacchaeus, prostitutes, lepers and people with mental illness – as well as respected and wealthy people like the Pharisees in today's reading. Time after time, Jesus breaks down social, cultural and theological boundaries. And he encourages his followers to do likewise.

In today's **Gospel** reading, Jesus is invited to a meal hosted by a leading Pharisee and we're told that his opponents were watching him closely to see what he will do on this Sabbath day. Jesus in turn is closely watching his opponents and how they jostle for the best seats, closest to the host.

Jesus suggests to his host that when giving a lunch or dinner he should rethink his guest list – not just inviting friends and family but rather inviting the **poor**, the **crippled** and the **blind** – types of people that Pharisees considered excluded from God's blessing. When I spoke to my asylum seeker friends, they told a similar story ... that when hosting a meal the cultural expectation in many Eastern cultures is to invite the poor living nearby. It's similar to the parable of the sheep and the goats, where people are rewarded for extending hospitality to the poor, because by doing so they are actually serving Jesus ... and determining what sort of welcome they will ultimately receive from God, who welcomes all.

Turning to the **Hebrews reading** we find a list of similar behaviours being encouraged – love one another, show hospitality, and care for those in prison.

Do not neglect to **show hospitality** to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)



The word used for hospitality in this passage is **philoxenia**, literally, **love for strangers**, as opposed to a word that we are perhaps more familiar with, **xenophobia**, which is **fear of strangers**. The writer suggests that people have entertained angels unawares, just as Abraham does in Genesis chapter 18 where the three strangers turn out to be messengers from God, as captured in the famous **Rublev icon**.

What we can glean from these passages is that hospitality involves welcoming strangers and loving them as you would your own family and friends. Hospitality Jesus style also invites us to look **down** the social ladder to people that society ignores or forgets about. So hospitality starts with an **attitude of acceptance and welcome** that leads to **practical action**, all based on God's extravagant welcome and love for us and all people.

Along the way, we might be surprised at the gifts and perspectives that a guest brings – just as the two travelers discovered on the road to Emmaus when they invited Jesus to share their journey with them and then invited this familiar yet mysterious stranger to stay for the evening meal – their eyes – and their hearts – were opened to see the world in a different way.

#### [Practising hospitality](#)

So how might we extend hospitality – as individuals, as a community and as a nation? The first point is that we already know quite a bit about hospitality – offering a welcome to those who may be different to us or similar to us – like the folk we

welcome to Helping Hand or to the monthly Drop-In gathering or to the weekly community lunches at Croydon North. In each case we are welcoming people made in God's image and worthy to receive our love and inclusion – yet who may be overlooked by the wider community.

But I sometimes wonder whether we're aware of how a newcomer might feel walking into our church and what a scary step that can be for many people. We can easily get caught in a rut of habit and comfort, sitting in the same place in church, chatting to our small circle of friends. So I have a challenge for you ... after church today, make a deliberate point of talking to someone you wouldn't normally speak to ... perhaps even arrange to get together with them during the week for a coffee or a meal. You'd be making yourself a little vulnerable, but it might just be the beginning of a new friendship and connection.

How about on a **national level**? There are some 70 million refugees and displaced people in the world – quite a staggering number. Most of these are living in poor neighbouring countries – so the millions displaced by the Syrian conflict are mostly living in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, those fleeing the conflict in South Sudan have been welcomed by Uganda and the vast majority of Rohingya refugees from Burma are living in Bangladesh.

Only a relatively small number of refugees make it to Australia yet we hardly roll out the welcome mat. In fact we – or the Federal government on our behalf – does everything it can to make these people **unwelcome** and make their life so difficult that they will consider returning to where they came from – usually situations of persecution, war and violence. What hospitality do we offer these people? ... we lock them up in prison for years and years, provide only the bare essentials of health care and shelter and wonder why so many of them are completely depressed or suicidal.

Today's Bible readings make it quite clear what a Christian response looks like! It's one reason why Liz and I make a habit of visiting asylum seekers in the detention centre at Broadmeadows. On the forms that we have to fill out every week to apply to be allowed to visit, we have to write out our **reason** for wanting to visit these people. I normally write something along the lines that I am a Minister in the Uniting Church and choose to follow the publicly stated position of our church which is to welcome refugees and asylum seekers to our country. I do this in person at the detention centre.



The detention centre is an intimidating place to visit as it is run like a prison, with armed guards and officers everywhere, watching everything you do or say. What can I offer these asylum seekers? I can't fast-track their visa applications nor

affect the outcome of the courts. I can't speak the native language of most of them nor really comprehend the desperate circumstances that made them flee their home countries. What I can do, though, is offer a human welcome – often in the form of a hug – and treat them as real people looking for safety and a new home. And I can listen to their stories and drink the many cups of green tea that they make for me, which is the one act of hospitality they can offer visitors. And so I offer a personal welcome.

Perhaps the last word today belongs to Jesus ... whoever welcomes one of the least ones in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.