



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Kingdom Hospitality

Sunday 31st August 2025

Readings: Luke 14.1, 7-14 & Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16

The Right Reverend Lynne Cullens

The Bishop of Barking

In our reading from Luke's Gospel today, we have Jesus educating the Pharisee and his dinner guests in kingdom etiquette, and most specifically in the practice of hospitality.

The Hebrews reading too speaks of showing hospitality, this time to strangers – the Greek word used is *philoxenia* literally love of the stranger - and we see in the Gospels Christ living out this radical kingdom hospitality that welcomed the leper, the tax collector, the shamed, the marginalised and the oppressed. Jesus saw that the welcoming of all as equal and honoured isn't so much about food and drink as it is about opening ourselves to the human worth and dignity of each and every person, as a beloved child of God.

And Jesus took risks to do that...he met with those shunned as sinners, he engaged with those who were considered unclean and untouchable, he served the excluded, he healed the sick and fed the hungry. For Jesus kingdom hospitality was an act of love – for the ruling authorities, it was viewed as subversion, and it constituted a threat.

But Jesus knew that to engage in true hospitality he needed to take risks and make himself vulnerable...he needed to serve but he also needed to open himself to being served...hospitality after all requires a guest. And we see this openness and vulnerability nowhere more powerfully than in his reception of the attentions of Mary as she lavishes perfumed nard over his feet at a dinner in his honour at Bethany, as described in chapter 12 of John's Gospel. This act was shocking to those around him, but Jesus receives her gift in the loving way in which she bestows it...to allow ourselves to be served by others – and to receive that service with grace, gratitude and respect - is as important in the economy of the kingdom as serving others ourselves.

For there is, after all, a necessarily humble quality to both giving and receiving hospitality, as alluded to in Jesus' teaching in Luke. He teaches that it's better to embrace such humility than to have it imposed; to attain something of the same mind that was in Christ - as Philippians has it – by showing gratitude, being kind, open to others; being willing to both give and receive, to serve and be served.

And in Christ's invitation to us to share in the hospitality of the Eucharist we join in communion with others and with Jesus himself. Elizabeth Newman in her book 'Untamed Hospitality' speaks of eucharistic liturgy 'forming us in the practice of hospitality' as we greet each other in the Peace, as fellow guests at the meal which is to be shared, the prayer then recalling the meal with the first followers, before the invitation to approach God's table and to kneel side by side with all who come; anyone who takes up Christ's gracious bidding to be fed, to share in divine, life-giving hospitality and to take that in, that we might each go out and be Christ's life in the world today.

And that life is one of generous welcome...welcome to those who are new to our churches, welcome to those who arrive from other parts of the world, ready to take in with gratitude

the gifts of those with little to offer materially but whose hospitality is rich in the economy of God.

This is Gospel work, work of being more than doing....church building's opened, kettles filled and boiled, biscuits and cake lovingly offered and the Holy Spirit drawing in that great diverse community which is the people of God. Refugees and asylum seekers arrive, the bereaved, the lonely, those wanting to talk, others wanting a space to be silent, those needing someone to play with their children, others wanting to play with those children because they no longer have youngsters in their lives. In the apparent inactivity of gentle, gracious and loving hospitality extended to all, God comes and the Holy Spirit weaves between people of all ages and many different backgrounds and circumstances, healing, connecting, uplifting, bonding and consoling; people loving one another as sisters and brothers, as the Hebrews reading for today encourages us to do.

Kingdom hospitality is not simply a precursor to sharing a Gospel of transformation – it is the Gospel of transformation lived out.

‘When we gather around the table and break bread together, we are transformed not only individually but also as community’, writes Henri Nouwen. ‘Not only as individuals but as community, we become the living Christ, taken, blessed, broken and given to the world. As one body, we become a living witness of God’s immense desire to bring all peoples and nations together as the one family of God’

May God continue to bless us richly as we are formed to his purposes. Amen.