

Hospitality

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14



Over the past couple of years, Gareth and I have quite got out of the way of inviting people to our house for a meal, or even for coffee, much less to stay for a few days. Of course the early Covid-19 restrictions made such things impossible anyway, but somehow we don't seem to have found our way back to doing it. Today's lessons therefore come as something of a challenge!



In the Gospel reading from S. Luke we have both sides of the hospitality question explored, first from the point of view of the guest and then from that of the host. We should remember that Jesus, during his ministry, depended quite a lot on the hospitality of others – he was a very experienced 'guest' and had had plenty of opportunity to see how hospitality should be done graciously. I have, as a guest, experienced the frisson of horror on entering a strange dining room wondering where I ought to sit – the attentive host has worked that out beforehand, and tries to be on hand to guide their guests to the most appropriate seat as unobtrusively as possible, but not every host is able to be that attentive. At least I have never had to face the situation Jesus describes of being turfed out of a seat of honour when someone more important arrives, though I have, very occasionally, realised that I had been invited primarily to keep another potentially awkward guest entertained!

Of course, the point that Jesus is making here is less concerned with hospitality than with having an accurate view of ones-self, not being over puffed-up with a sense of one's own importance. For some of us this can be a live issue – if we see the world only from our own perspective, with ourselves at the centre of it. Others, of course, of more self-effacing nature, are more inclined to under-value themselves. Many of the stories about Jesus reveal the sensitive way in which he treats people like this.

Then, when Jesus comments on the duties of a host, he is encouraging his hearers to take account of the benefit the invitation bestows on the guest, rather than on the credit that might accrue to the host and goes on to say that then there will be benefit for the host as well, the one flowing from the other.



Timothy Schmaltz's sculpture, 'Angels Unawares'

This is something that is expressed so very elegantly in the passage from the epistle to the Hebrews – by shewing hospitality to strangers ‘some have entertained angels without knowing it’. Is that something you have ever experienced?


I can only remember one occasion when I have come close to shewing such hospitality. A young man once turned up at Evensong at S. Matthew's, during an interregnum thirty years ago, with something of a sob-story, that later proved to be true. He was hungry, and I took him home after the service and managed to rustle up a meal. We talked as he ate, and I learnt something of his story – he was homeless, but was not seeking accommodation. Over subsequent months and years he turned up on my doorstep quite often, then would be absent for some weeks. Once, after a longer absence, he said he had been in prison, and I found out, from a telephone conversation with a neighbour near his boy-hood home in Southampton, that he had been brain-damaged at birth and although rational most of the time, could sometimes be quite the opposite and could turn violent, which, in his teenage years had led to his parents effectively disowning him. All sorts of people had tried to help him, in Derby and other places in the country, clergy, police, social workers, other well-meaning individuals - but nothing was properly co-ordinated, and it always seemed to end with him doing something reckless and ending up in prison.



Darley Park

The last time I saw him, twenty years ago, was by chance in Darley Park; on that occasion he half pulled out a knife but he made no attempt to use it and I walked away saying I was not going to put up with that. I can see in him something of the angel, but also a lot of the un-angelic. Real life has a way of being messy like this, and although this story does not have a happy ending that I am aware of, I am still glad I took this chance, when on so many others I have overlooked the person in distress, preferring to ‘walk by on the other side’, to lift a sentiment from my last Zoom sermon.

Don't be discouraged by this example; mentioning the subject of this sermon to Gareth whilst in the midst of writing these notes, he commented that he had had a brief chat earlier that day with someone as he walked down to early communion at the Cathedral. He was a rather shabbily-dressed elderly man who had emerged from a down-at-heel house converted into flats, and they exchanged a few words on indifferent subjects. As they spoke, Gareth saw the man's spirits lift – what he wanted was some human contact. In such encounters there is undoubtedly a touch of the angelic.



The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear

The passage from the epistle to the Hebrews goes on to encourage a sympathetic relationship with others, especially those in difficulty, the living of a decent life, not falling into the trap of loving money; encouragement to do good and to share what we have - all these things are enabled by remembering God's promise, never to leave or forsake us. This is a theme that has recurred in my mind time and time again over the past couple of years when so much has seemed uncertain. Today, if one listens to the news, there is no shortage of potential disaster wherever you look, but for those of us who have faith in God, we can hope to find ourselves, not paralysed with fear, but liberated to face the future with realistic hope "The Lord is my helper: I will not be afraid" to quote from Hebrews.

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