

Extending hospitality

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James, July 17th 2016

Bible passages: Luke 10.38 – 42, Genesis 18.1 – 10a

One of the most moving and humbling experiences on my three mission visits to Tonga was related to hospitality. The clergy on the visit had each been invited to preach in the parish churches in Nuku'alofa the capital town. On this Sunday I was dropped off in a side street and there was the church, set in tropical vegetation, free range pigs grazing on the roadside and semi-feral dogs sitting on the road. Smartly dressed congregation on their way to worship. The church hall looked in need of repairs but the church was exquisite – woven tapa cloths and ornate sanctuary. The singing was memorable, unaccompanied and in perfect harmony, sung with conviction. And it was at the end it happened. At the conclusion of the service, after greeting people on their way out I was guided to the hall. There was set up a long trestle table with lots of plates and containers piled high with food. I waited for the people to come over and share in this feast – as had been experienced on other occasions. But no – no one came, just me and my host person. Then I saw a van reversing up to the door. At that point I just had to ask, 'what's happening now?' 'The food is for you', and a couple of burly young men started loading it into the back of the van. Such is 'koha' Tongan style.

After thank you from the local Vicar, and being thankful myself for the experience I was taken, with the food back to my accommodation with the Sisters of the Community of the Sacred Name. They were at not all surprised and explained Tongan custom. We ate and shared with visitors who called by over the next few days. For me it was indeed humbling and I learned a huge lesson about generosity from people who don't have much and really put themselves out in time and money in providing a koha.

- 1) This brings us to thinking first about the *Hospitality* – the theme of the day. I've called it 'Extending hospitality' as we heard the story of Martha and Mary offering hospitality, and the story of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah. Jewish culture was not without its protocols, and it helps to realise hospitality was big in their culture. From the story of Jesus coming to the home of Simon the Pharisee we note the conversation as Jesus observes 'I entered your house; you gave me no water for your feet,...you gave me no kiss (of greeting), you did not anoint my head with oil...'
In this context we can have sympathy for Martha, as the visitors would likely have included some of the men disciples as well as Jesus. Martha was concerned to give them a fitting and respectful reception. No wonder she was aggrieved at Mary who had taken opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to him. We might note Jesus was understanding of the situation which had led to strong words between the two sisters. He gently and lovingly rebukes her – 'Martha, Martha.....' Jesus thereby indicates his concern for each one, and on this occasion what was important was his relationship with both Mary and Martha. His interest was in them and not in the state of the house or the urgency of preparing the food.

What are we to make of this story in the context of different cultures? Each is different in some respects, Tongan, Jewish and our own. How might this apply to

hospitality offered at St James? I believe it is a matter of priorities – as Jesus to the sisters. Relationships, with Jesus and each other are paramount. That's a reason why we're here, to further build our relationship with Jesus through worship, and in the community as we 'love one another.' Our events and programmes and all that happens have their place, yet they are for enabling a greater goal, of being, in the presence of Jesus.

Furthermore, providing hospitality takes time and energy and this needs to be acknowledged. My experience of Tonga taught me that. I note also the sheer *generosity* of the community. Likewise at St James, it seems to me that hospitality and generosity are companion gifts. Such we will see next Sunday when we meet to welcome our Bishop and provide hospitality. In no sense is this taken for granted. We can be like those disciples of the early church who 'broke bread and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of the people.'(Acts 2.46)

2) Second there's a further aspect we can take from the sisters of Bethany. Distinctions are often drawn between Mary the contemplative one, and Martha the active one. In a sense our worship is like this. I remember the visit of an English Bishop John Taylor coming to speak in this very church. He described a distinction between the 'prayer of movement' and the 'prayer of quiet.' Describing the prayer of movement it is like the way we engage in intercessions, moving from subject to subject. The prayer of quiet is more of silence, or with quiet music background, such as we experience in the time of receiving Holy Communion and the time that follows. Each way has its own merits, and it is important there is time for both in our worship. I think there's a personality distinction where some are uncomfortable with extended silence. Then for another the movement of topic to topic is hard in their estimation to give particular focus they would like. As we're each different I believe we need to retain both ways in our worship. There may also be gender issues in this as well. I remember in one parish there were a significant number of men who attended the early, quiet, said service of a Sunday morning. On enquiring they said that with frenetic activity of work during the week they just needed quiet space, and it was less in the more active, movement order of service. Of course it needs to be said the same may apply for women where there's children or the busyness of employment. But in so saying it does emphasise there's a wide variety of needs our worship seeks to meet in offering it to God. Mary and Martha are both there. The prayer of the day draws up something of this as we prayed: 'amid the cares of our daily lives, make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence in Christ and others.'

3) The Old Testament reading prompts the sermon title – *extending hospitality*. This was the occasion of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham offers to provide food and water to refresh and eat before they continue on their way. Abraham goes to Sarah and asks her to bake some bread, and a calf is killed to share and they watch the visitors eat. It turns out they have come to visit and with a message that even though they were 'advanced in age' Sarah would bear a son. Sarah laughs to herself and God hears. Then God says to Abraham, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Thus tradition regards this hosting as of the three angelic visitors.

The story has been greatly enhanced and extended by the famous icon of the Russian Rublev in the 15th century. Here he has portrayed the story and the three visitors appear no less as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hospitality is focussed around a table

and a cup, implying Eucharist. A gap is in the centre could be for another to share, thus hospitality being further extended.

Today's Scripture sentence suggests as we show hospitality to strangers as did Abraham so may one have entertained angels without knowing it. How can this apply? Do we perhaps have angels visiting St James and not realising? Who knows? Let me share of something that happened for Christian friends. They would Saturday by Saturday have a stall at the Porirua market. There they displayed and sold personally made Christian trinkets, and cards. One morning a person came who they hadn't previously seen, looked over what they had and commended their initiative. After the complimentary words the person disappeared into the shoppers. My friends were sure it was an angelic visitor. A few years ago evangelist Billy Graham wrote a book called 'Angels' where he gives accounts of angelic visitors - protecting, guiding, and encouraging. Who knows? We may have. Whatever, it endorses the words of Jesus in caring for ones with needs: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.' Here we might add the human family, as we extend hospitality. May we welcome, listen to, be sensitive to, open to ones who find here is an open door.

I conclude then with a verse from the hymn: 'God is here, as we God's people meet to offer praise and prayer....Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom, in an age of change and doubt keep us faithful to your gospel, help us work your purpose out. Here, in this day's dedication, all we have to give, receive. We who cannot live without you, we adore you, we believe.'