

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Genesis 18:1-10a, Colossians 1:15-29 Luke 10:38-42

Events in the US this past week have revealed something of the fractures in multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-lingual societies. It is troubling, but our Christian tradition has something to say and should, must speak. No doubt many of you remember the movie 'Guess who's coming to dinner', starring Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn and Sidney Poitier. For those of you too young to remember it is the story of a young woman who brings her fiancé home to meet her parents for the first time. Her beau however is an African-American and at a time, 1967, mixed marriages were still illegal in some US states. In the movie the simple act of entertaining, having someone over for dinner, becomes an act of hospitality. Indeed it is perhaps just a glimpse of what we might call the hospitality of God.

We have just heard one of the most important pieces of scripture in the New Testament, the wonderful Christological hymn from St Paul's letter to the Colossians. Its claims are extraordinary, without precedent in their time. Christ is: The image of God. The first born of all creation. The maker of heaven and earth. The sustainer of the universe. The head of the church. The first born from the dead. The reconciler of creation and the church! It is *pièce de résistance*! But it presents a significant challenge for a parish and community like ours. We have an ethic of inclusion, we are open to others and yet we proclaim that Christ is *the one* through whom everything has come into being and through whom everything has been restored. So how do we hold together our sense of the uniqueness *and* universality of Christ *and* be a community where all can find a home? What is it that we need to say to our multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-lingual society? There are no simple answers, *but* it begins with hospitality, this is the 'Biblical' answer and it begins with the hospitality of God demonstrated in the life of Jesus.

What of this hospitality? All of us have been to a hotel, motel, café or restaurant. But in the Biblical tradition it has a particular meaning. One writer put it: *Hospitality is an accommodation of the vulnerable stranger*; accommodation meaning "making room" or "adapting to," not just putting up with people, tolerating or even entertaining them. It is therefore a costly action, involving change within the host for the benefit of the guest. The problem with this of course is that word 'change.' This is tricky it is demanding. Samuel Zwemer is not a well-known name in this country, he was an American Reformed Minister in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. Often known as the Apostle to the Moslems. He claimed, not uncontroversially, that 'we must become Moslems to the Moslem if we are to gain them for Christ.' Charles de Foucauld a French Catholic did much the same in French Algeria during this time. Neither of these two men claimed missionary success, if by that we mean conversions. By his own account, de Foucauld never converted a single soul to Catholicism. But they lived with folk, they learnt from them, they extended hospitality and importantly they received it.

Last week we heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan and we wrestled with the idea that an outsider, an alien shows us the way; it is an outsider that demonstrates what Christian hospitality is all about and I asked is this something that potentially we could be afraid of? In accepting hospitality we are no longer 'in control' something that most folk desire, even crave. I dwelt further on the parable during the week. When Jesus says 'go and do likewise,' could he mean

give *and* receive hospitality as you have seen demonstrated. Remember when Jesus sends the seventy out ahead of him, twice he tells them to eat what is offered. That's a big ask, he's not just saying to them 'eat your greens;' remember food was an integral part of Jewish law, there were all sorts of scruples about food, receive hospitality he says, regardless.

Speaking of Algeria I have been helped this week by the work of French Algerian Philosopher Jacques Derrida. He uses the French word *hôte* as a test case, showing that it carries the double meaning of both guest and host. For Derrida, the guest/host dichotomy is not as rigid as it might appear, for it is only in the act of receiving the guest that the host becomes a host. The act of hospitality turns the home inside-out, for the guest is, as it were, the means by which the host enters: *We thus enter from the inside: the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest—who comes from outside. The master thus enters from the inside as if he came from the outside. He enters his home thanks to the visitor, by the grace of the visitor.* This is important, we are both guest and host. Those of us who strive to live 'in the Spirit.'

This week past saw Theresa May give her last speech as the British PM. She urged politicians to find "common ground"; compromise, she said should not be seen as a dirty word. She spoke of growing rancour, tribal bitterness and vile abuse at a criminal level. "Being prepared to make compromises does not entail a rejection of our values and convictions by one iota. Rather it is exactly the way to defend them." Her mention of 'one iota' reminds us of Jesus' words in regards the law. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (RSV). This question of the law and the gospel and their interaction was the theme of our Food4Thought last Sunday which made for some lively discussion. Jesus didn't reject the law he came to place in it in a different context, that of love, Good News. We continue to struggle with this today law *and* gospel, unique *and* universal; that struggle is manifested by the tribalism in politics, society and Church.

What we in the Church need to learn is that to defend and promote our faith we must be prepared to be open to the possibility for compromise; this is difficult. We gain nothing by being wishy washy on our doctrine of God, by saying that ultimately all religions and cultures are the same, they are not. But we need to be open in our hospitality and we need to practise reciprocity. Both receiving and offering hospitality. Like Jesus, we are to welcome vulnerable strangers into our midst, just as we ourselves have been welcomed into God's, like Mary and Martha, Abraham and Sarah. But like them we must be prepared to know that this will change us as it changed them; we are not in control, we too are potentially vulnerable strangers to others, we are never *just* hosts, never *just* guests.

We can and must hold on to the historic, Biblical traditions of Christianity, founded on the nature of God reconciled to us, in Christ through his hospitality. Our faith our identity stands or falls on the nature of Christ as both guest and host, as both unique *and* universal. If we truly live this, in him *all* can find hospitality and a home. This is our calling, indeed many have risked everything to make this truth known. Amen.