

## Being Hospitable

*Jeremiah 2:4-14; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16*

Two of the queens of British cooking make interesting comment on the importance of the table in the home. Mary Berry commented: "I'm very keen on the family getting together around the table because you learn so much of what's going on. With a full tummy, they begin to talk to you. People now have busy lives, but once or twice a week, it's lovely to sit all around together."

Nigella Lawson, in similar vein, wrote: "A table is more than a piece of furniture, just as food is more than mere fuel. When I moved into my first home many years ago, before I did anything else I bought a table, and not just to eat at, but to live around."

Hospitality: the act of being friendly and welcoming. In a world that is sometimes cold and detached, or self-absorbed or fearful. It's not so much the food and drink that is on offer, though that certainly helps, it is the sitting together, being together, that enables conversation. It is the opportunity to look, and to listen, to observe, and to share that reminds us of that essential human need for fellowship, for engagement, and for society.

The Jesus of the gospels is preoccupied with eating. Not only is it implied that some people think He was a drunkard and glutton, but there are in all of the gospels endless references to eating, banquets, tables and reclining at tables.

The table is one of Jesus' key places for teaching, reproving, and encountering those who were marginalised. The table served as a focal point for some of Jesus' parables. Tables, and the people who gather around tables, are close to the heart of Jesus and that should not escape our notice. Tables are, as John Bell has said, "level places." Not all may be equal at a table, but all are at the same level, and when seated at the table, we have to look at those around us in the eye.

A modern-day tragedy is so little time at home and at work is spent eating and meeting around tables. There is a Near Eastern proverb that says, "I saw them eating and I knew who they were." In the early church, common meals were a way of meeting physical needs but in such a manner as to embarrass no one. Those who had and those who did not have sat at table together without distinction. Table fellowship means full acceptance of one another.

It is no wonder that the writer to the Letter of the Hebrews says: "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Christianity can be defined in many ways, but for me one of the most significant is 'hospitality'.

"Christianity's default position is hospitality, even as we received hospitality on the cross of Christ."

We are 'prejudiced towards hospitality, because that's the way God treated us, and how we are supposed to treat others.<sup>1</sup> At God's table all are welcome.

*Oslo* is an award-winning play set in the 1990s and tells the true story of Norwegian diplomats brokering discussions between the warring Israelis and Palestinians. The play is inspired by Norwegian diplomat Mona Juul and her husband, Terje Rød-Larsen, who coordinated months of top-secret negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat. *Oslo* portrays how real diplomacy works. The play shows what can happen when people on opposite sides of what is perceived as an intractable divide strive to create a shared humanity. Is there something to learn in current political debate in our country today? A table, food, drink, talk. Realised community. Barriers cracking. Hope persistently refusing to be quelled.

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In the centre place in most of our churches a table is found – the communion table. A table around which women and men gather, from every conceivable background, to share bread and wine and do what Jesus and His disciples did to remember the saving love of God, where we read in Mark 14:18 that, "...they were at table eating..."

There are other tables in our churches. I think of the tables at coffee time after services, and during the week on Wednesdays, where the church community and the community beyond gather to share, support, critique, encourage and relate. I've been able to attend on Wednesday mornings recently, and standing at the door watching, listening, marvelling at the way people serve, and talk, and pass on concerns, and take time is truly heart-warming. It is one of the privileges of being Minister here to see people willing to make events like these happen. It is a real commitment, and it matters.

Every one of us finding a place in the table fellowship of God. This *radical* assertion that all will be embraced by God. In the family of God all find a place at the table. There are no outsiders anymore. Nobody on the outside, everybody on the inside. The people we like, the people we don't like. Different colour of skin. Different lifestyle choices. Different genders. Different ages. Different faith traditions. And all those other people, broken and bad, welcomed in by our hospitable Lord. We often entertain angels unawares.

One of the insightful things at our weekly Wednesday coffee morning is watching this work, and not work. The easy friendships, and the strained ones. The words of support and the words of criticism. The falling outs and the fallings in. Around those half dozen tables every Wednesday all human life, its strengths, and its weaknesses, is seen. The greatest joy is the welcome given to our visitors from the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, who have found a home here, however temporary. All are welcome at our table, the broken and the whole, the soft-hearted and the sharp tongued. It

is at tables like that where we can learn, and maybe re-learn, our manners and our better behaviour. Where we can offer thanks, or apology.

Who is at the table in the life of faith? Who is kept away, and why? Where is the radical welcome?

Who is at the table of society, and who is kept away, and why? In the hospitality of Jesus, and His welcome of all, what are we being told about our Church and our community?

Who are at the edges of our cities, towns and villages just waiting, waiting to be called down, and invited in? None so broken they can't be mended. None so wicked they can't be forgiven. None so sick they can't be healed. None so lost they can't be found. None so unable to keep their promises that they can't be given another chance. None so unclean on the inside that they can't be purified. None so narrow-minded that they can't be enlightened. None so stuck in their ways that they can't be moved. None so hard-hearted that they can't be softened. None so invisible that they can't be seen.

Hospitality in the name of Christ is more than a slogan about 'inclusiveness' and more than a warm welcome. Hospitality reveals to us the heart and the practice of God, and shows us what we are to be as well as do. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Who is at our table? Might Jesus Himself be at our table? Is He truly welcome? All those angels of whom we are unaware, be entertained by us.

I wonder what Jesus would make of the broken tables today in the political and economic meltdown in our country. What would Jesus make of the broken tables around our land, where few now sit, and failing to find a consensus for the community and nation? Would not Jesus sit them all down and keep them talking until the greater good of all the people might be achieved?

At a table.

Communion tables, coffee tables, conference tables, dinner tables. At table – eating. Remembering Who God is – the One Who saves and is present. Remembering who we are: the ones who are saved, and no longer alone. At tables like these God’s hospitality, God’s giving nature, is found in what God does, and in what we do and why we do it. Together. Whenever we offer and share hospitality, we continue to show mutual love to our sisters and brothers. And maybe, just maybe, a few angels. See if you can spot them when you go through today.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> William H Willimon, Fear of the Other, p7