

## **SERMON: Sunday –28 August 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Biblical Hospitality**

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1,7-14

I met someone this week who recounted how they had received help in their time of need. Listening to them tell their story, I couldn't help think of today's verse in Hebrews.

(SLIDE)

13 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. 2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

There was one of having received a radical hospitality just when they needed it. And I couldn't help thinking that this person with whom I was speaking was someone who themselves had offered generous hospitality to others in the past. I know it because I'd seen them do it. And now, in their own need, help was coming back to them.

This person embodies for me what it looks like to be humble. And so it was fitting to hear that Jesus was right, those who humble themselves will be exalted and will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

As if criticising his host, Jesus challenges those who were watching him closely, trying to trap him, by saying, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

(SLIDE)

The writer of the STB material this week wrote that, "Most churches are happy to proclaim that 'All are Welcome'. Do we mean it? Are we prepared for the disruption that might follow if certain of the 'all' were to come and take their place at the table? Is there the same buzz of excitement when a homeless person arrives unexpectedly on a Sunday morning as when a Bishop or former Moderator drops by?"

That's a challenge isn't it?

When we're hosting, do we honour those who others dishonour or ignore? Can the church actively look to host outsiders? What might that look like?

Some do it own practical ways. There is the care van for example, run by Edinburgh City Mission, where people exercise their faith through helping to feed and clothe the homeless. Even if we can't do that we can support it in prayer or with our money.

We hear a lot about the cost of living crisis and fuel poverty at the moment and by all accounts the predictions are that this will worsen this winter following another spike in fuel prices and rising inflation.

Surely then there will be many opportunities to meet needs. The churches in Livingston and the Calders are thinking about warm hubs - places where people can gather for a bit of warmth which they may not be able to enjoy in their own homes. We're thinking of incorporating this into the listening project cafe (and we'll see a video clip in a few minutes of a new space created for one to one listening).

Warm hubs or warm banks is an idea that churches are wondering is this a God given opportunity to show the sort of hospitality with our community that our faith asks for.

Perhaps there will be opportunities during the winter weeks to do something to demonstrate radical hospitality with our community. I say with our community rather than for our community or to our community because we do all things together and often when we choose to do acts of service in our community or family or neighbourhood we end up receiving back in ways we hadn't asked for or expected.

Jesus was right. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

The theologian and writer Brian McLaren has written about the power of ongoing discernment, allowing ourselves to be ever drawn by the Holy Spirit into service and action on behalf of others. Here's an extract from one of his books.

(SLIDE)

"The Spirit leads us downward. To the bottom, to the place of humility, to the position and posture of service . . . that's where the Spirit, like water, flows. . .

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If you listen to the Spirit, here is what will happen to you. You'll be at a party and you'll notice on one side of the room all the beautiful people laughing and

having fun together. In a far corner, you'll notice a person who is alone, feeling awkward, not knowing anyone. The Spirit will draw you to the person in need. You may become the bridge that connects the outsider to the insiders—and in that connection, both will be better off. . . .

Here's what will happen to you if you listen to the Spirit. You will realize that someone is angry at you or resentful toward you . . . or worked behind your back to do you harm. Everything in you will want you to write them off or get them back. But the Spirit will draw you toward them in humility. . . .

Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit. You will see a person or a group being vilified or scapegoated. Everyone is blaming them, shaming them, gossiping about them, feeling superior to them, venting their anxieties on them. . . . But the Spirit will draw you to differ courageously and graciously. . . . You will risk your reputation in defending the person or people being scapegoated. And in that risk, both you and they will know that God's Spirit is alive and at work in your midst.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what will happen to you. It will be late. You will be tired. There will be dishes to do or clothes to pick up or trash to empty. Someone else should have done this, you will think with anger. You will rehearse in your mind the speech you will give them. And then you will think, But I guess they're just as tired and overworked as I am. So maybe I can help. You won't do this as a manipulative ploy but as a simple act of service. . . .

There is a prison near you. A hospital. A park or a bridge or an alley where homeless people sleep. . . . There's a country in great need or a social problem that few people notice. If you listen to the Spirit, you will be drawn toward an opportunity to serve. At first, the thought will frighten or repel you. But when you let the Spirit guide you, it will be a source of great joy—one of the richest blessings of your life.”

Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014).

Let me finish with a question. What is the unique gift that God has given you to reach out to offer to the world to make it a better place? And how can we bring those gifts together to bless our community with the sort of hospitality that the Bible speaks of and which Jesus demonstrates?

Let's pray.

O God,

give us eyes to see the people around us, family, friends, others  
and help us to see beyond

their faces into their lives,  
to walk in their shoes  
and really see them as you do.  
For you see each human  
as your beloved child,  
you have hopes and dreams  
for them and wish them to know you.  
Lord, who are these people to us,  
who are we to them?  
Do we treat them the same?  
Do we see you in them?  
Lord, teach us to see as you do,  
to love each person  
and to treat them  
as we would like to be treated.  
May our generosity of spirit grow and grow  
as we learn to be loving and caring  
as you are.  
In Jesus name.  
Amen.