

Along the track

An Invitation

Over the past three years at Easter time, a hand written letter has appeared in our box inviting us 'to attend the most important event for Christians – the annual commemoration of the death of Jesus Christ'. Others too in our neighbourhood receive similar invitations from the local Jehovah's Witnesses Congregation. The invitation invites us to attend personally or by video link.

I was impressed that someone has taken the time to write this invitation. From the style of writing and the script, I suspect that the author was getting on a bit, just like me. It wasn't something copied from a computer but a personally, handwritten calling. It must have taken time, effort and a generous spirit.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas spent much of the war in a concentration camp. When his fellow utterly exhausted prisoners returned from their work each day, they were greeted by a mangy dog that was delighted to see them. It jumped up and down and licked their faces. In this grim place, the prisoners would smile and even laugh. It made them feel more human, to feel welcome, even by a dog. Levinas developed a theory of hospitality – to give and receive hospitality is the essence of being human.

Hospitality has deep roots in the Scriptures extending all the way back to the Book of Genesis. The Jewish people were acutely aware of what it was like to be an outcast, a stranger, to be treated inhumanely. That had happened to them often. So hospitality was much more than simply offering a meal. It became central to what it meant to be the People of God. "Treat the foreigner as your native-born," Leviticus 19 says. "Love them as yourself, for you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." In other words, you know what it is like to be an outsider, to be rejected or lonely, cut off from one's roots. Hospitality is an offer to identify with outsiders and to treat them like insiders. God's prophets remind Israel and Judah that God will judge them based on how they care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Right throughout in Hebrew scriptures, the notion of hospitality includes identifying with the outsiders, walking in their shoes, treating them as if you were in that predicament. Hospitality is treating outsiders like insiders, just as God treated us.

Hospitality in the Christian scriptures is also significant. Jesus accepted the hospitality of those who followed him and even the outcasts, as it were, those considered to be sinners or those in despised professions like a tax collector. During his public life, he had no home. He relied on the kindness of others. He sent his apostles out and told them to take nothing with them, just accept hospitality where and when it was given. Such hospitality was a characteristic of the early church. Early Church communities developed a reputation for welcome, acceptance and love. The early Church welcomed outsiders.

In Jesus' discourse on the final judgment in the Gospel of (Matthew 25) Jesus, in effect, was answering a question: What will the last judgment be like? What will be the test? How will we be judged?

His answer is challenging. He tells us that we will be judged on the basis of how we have treated the most vulnerable among us. At one point, he singles out "the stranger", the foreigner, the refugee: "I was a stranger and you made me welcome ... or ... you never made me welcome." Why? Not because we are trying to curry favour but because it will transform us. We will be better people because of it, more like God wants us to be. We will change by treating others that way, hospitality means walking in the other's shoes, it means working to understand them and how he or she sees the world, as it were. But his audience responded "We didn't know it was you we were serving" and the others said: "Had we known it was you we would have responded." But that's not the point – by doing this we are transformed and so is the other.

The mangy dog made a difference – he brought joy to the souls in this grim place. Hospitality doesn't ask "What's in it for me" but rather what do I have to offer, to share, to learn? Hospitality is about invitation, warmth and acceptance. It is not judgemental or exclusive. The invitation to the celebration of the Lord's Supper was all of those.

Hospitality is the mark of a truly gracious soul.

Regards
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