

Welcoming Christ in our neighbor Luke 14:1, 7-14

This morning we began worship as we do every Sunday we gather in this place; with the words of the Greeting: The Lord be with you: *And also with you.*

Some people may feel the greeting overly formal, but it has a very particular meaning. When we are greeted with “*The Lord be with you*”, from a faith perspective we are being offered the possibility to greet our Lord, to encounter the Christ in our worship this morning. And in that expectation, we respond to the worship leader with the hope that Christ may be “*also with you*”. As we gather for worship we dare to believe we can enable Christ to be present to one another and those around us. We can encounter Christ in the gathered Christian community. We will return to this shortly.

In this morning’s Gospel we have two teaching moments from Jesus, both set in situations of dinner hospitality; the warning against choosing a seat at the head table without being asked, and advice to the dinner host to not only invite guests who are influential and can return the favour, but also those who are on the edge of society and otherwise excluded or considered unacceptable. Hospitality or table fellowship, particularly for those on the margins of society, is a recurring theme in the Gospels and Jesus’ ministry. How many times do we read of Jesus sharing a meal with people, or of him relating parables about wedding feasts or other celebrations?

Even in this morning’s epistle reading from Hebrews we are reminded: “*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.*” Hospitality lies at the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But what is the nature of Christian hospitality? In his book ‘Reaching Out’ Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen suggests hospitality is about valuing people and making space for them to be themselves. Hospitality is being aware that the stranger or guest in our midst has something to offer if we take time to listen and attend to them. The guest can become a gift to us. Or, as Nouwen observes, “*a good host is one who believes that (their) guest is carrying a promise (they) want to reveal to anyone who shows genuine interest.*”

(I wonder, what would happen to the border security debate in this year’s election campaign if we began viewing asylum seekers in terms of ‘gift’ rather than as a problem we wish would go away)

And so we return to the greeting used at the beginning of worship this morning and each morning we gather. Implicit in the greeting is the belief that we can encounter Christ in the people we meet and greet. Christ is encountered in the context of human relationship.

It is this understanding which prompted Mother Theresa, who worked among the poor in Calcutta, to pray: “*Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and whilst nursing them, minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you and say, ‘Jesus, how sweet it is to serve you.’*”

At one level this prayer could be interpreting hospitality as showing concern for, or offering generosity to others, but I sense there is a far deeper meaning behind these words: That in the mystery of another person’s life or desperate need, we begin to glimpse another world, another way of being and living, the spirit of Christ.

This is also reflected in the poem *The Unknown God* by Alice Meynell in the worship resource sheet. Meynell appears to be seated in church during Holy Communion, as we are today, and in the sacred moment senses the presence of the divine in the people seated round her.

*One of the crowd went up,
And knelt before the Paten and the Cup,
Received the Lord, returned in peace, and prayed
Close to my side. Then in my heart I said:*

*“O Christ, in this man's life--
This stranger who is Thine--in all his strife,
All his felicity, his good and ill,
In the assaulted stronghold of his will,*

*“I do confess Thee here,
Alive within this life; I know Thee near (the poem concludes)*

*“...Christ in his numbered breath,
Christ in his beating heart and in his death,
Christ in his mystery! From that secret place
And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!”*

Such is the gift of hospitality when we are sensitive to, and attend to, those around us as guest. In the act of worship, in the presence of one another within Christian community, we not only draw closer to one another but to the eternal mystery of God.

In a few minutes time we will receive Christ's invitation to meet him in the breaking of the bread in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. As its title suggests – ‘Holy Communion’ – the sacrament is celebrated within community and affirms that within the context of community – the company of one another –we may also experience the spirit of Christ in our midst. As we prepare to celebrate the sacrament let us dare to believe that through a spirit of hospitality we can enable Christ to be present to one another and, in so doing, can glimpse another world, another way of being and living; touching the eternal mystery of God in human relationship to whom we attend. Amen