

## A cup of cold water

On Thursday morning, I found myself in a familiar situation. After our morning Eucharist, someone in the church, who had joined in the service but remained hidden behind a pillar throughout, asked if they could have a word. They did not want to tell me anything of their situation other than their first name and that they were currently without an income, and hoped that the church could help by giving them a small amount of money.

We receive many such requests throughout the week. Some are entirely genuine, and some are scams, from those who invent elaborate and often convincing stories. A common one is needing money for a rail fare to go and identify the body of a loved one, who has died while visiting friends. This week we received an email from the diocese warning of someone doing the rounds with a very believable story about her boss having given her a lift and then driven off with her handbag in his car. She had presented at two different churches on different days with the same story, and in both cases had been given money.

For those that are genuine, it's hard to say no, but on Thursday morning, I explained that here at St James's, because we have so many requests for financial assistance from visitors throughout the week, we have a flat policy that we simply don't give out money. I suggested other places where help may be available but these were instantly rebuffed, with the visitor explaining they had tried them but they wouldn't give out so much as a cup of water without beneficiaries first filling in a long form giving lots of personal details. And so the hospitality I was able offer was the giving of a cup of water, a conversation and a prayer. I was reminded how often we take all three for granted, and although they often don't seem nearly enough, nonetheless, each are important to our wellbeing

A cup of water is such a simple thing, and yet it's one of the most basic and elemental of human needs. This week the weather has been refreshingly cool after the heatwave of the previous week, when I suspect we all became more aware of the vitality of that most straightforward refreshment. In a society where

hospitality is more commonly offered in terms of cups of tea and coffee, when the temperature soars, a glass of cold water becomes the drink of choice.

When it comes to the Bible, and the stories of our faith, water takes on a rich symbolism. It is not only fundamental to life, but also resonant of the life force of Christ, who in the famous encounter with the woman at the well, speaks of himself as living water, able to quench our spiritual thirst. In that taboo-busting conversation, Christ breaks down societal and religious barriers in requesting the behaviour which is very much a mandate in the Jewish tradition – that you go out of your way to offer hospitality to strangers, and in doing so, will find yourself blessed. It is a life-changing experience for the Samaritan woman. There is an obvious link here to Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan, where the eponymous neighbour puts aside cultural difference and hostilities to help a stranger in need.

This was one of the stories we discussed at some length on our recent Parish Weekend, as we explored the theme of Radical Hospitality. We began with the premise that what makes hospitality radical is an element of surprise, of going the extra mile, of giving not from our abundance, but from our scarcity; of giving not so much from material wealth, but in giving of ourselves. It was Mother Theresa who pointed out, "We can do no great things; only small things with great love."

It is to this ancient practice and understanding of hospitality that Jesus directs us in this brief Gospel reading today in words reminiscent of his comments later in Matthew, in terms of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick and visiting prisoners: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

But who are these little ones of which Jesus speaks when he says, "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward"? On first reading it seems Jesus is talking

about his own disciples: those he sends out with virtually no provisions to do his work, to extend his ministry, dependent upon the hospitality of others. Yesterday a number of us gathered at St Paul's Cathedral to celebrate the ordination of a number of deacons, including our own John Russell. John was one of 29 such "little ones", disciples who are this morning being welcomed into the parishes where they will serve as disciples and curates. We pray for John and the parish of St Luke's Chelsea this morning, as they begin their journey together.

But if we push a little further, we soon realise that Jesus' definition of "these little ones" goes far beyond disciples, deacons, curates and travelling evangelists to include all those who come to us in need. As we are constantly learning in our projects which offer hospitality - chiefly our Winter Shelter and our International Breakfast Group - the welcome we offer is not transactional but relational.

On the Parish Weekend I shared two of my favourite definitions of hospitality. The first is from Joyce Borger: "These days hospitality may most often be associated with a Martha Stewart-esque home decor complete with fluffed pillows and fresh flowers placed just so. In Scripture, though, it means something quite different than creating the perfect environment. Instead, hospitality refers to creating a space in which relationships can develop."

The second is from Ann Bedford Ullanov: "The Holy refuses to stay put in a box . . . These meetings with God well beyond our images of God comprise great moments that smash us, or open us further to the transcendent or both."

When our Winter Shelter and International Breakfast are at their best, there are no longer hosts and guests, but rather we all come together as equals in a space where relationships can and do develop, and as a result, we are open to one another, open to the Christ in one another and open to transformation. In this environment, guests become volunteers. It's a model we see throughout the story of our faith, and which we celebrate in this sacrament each week, when, reminiscent of that act of hospitality in Emmaus, in the breaking of the bread, the guest becomes the host. When we welcome the stranger, the alien, the other, the 'little ones', we welcome Christ.

One of the highlights of our Parish Weekend is our Saturday night party that begins with games and culminates in part singalong, part disco. Thanks to this generosity of this congregation, this year we were

able to fund a number of places for many of those among us going through the gruelling asylum process. The time away gave us the opportunity to get to know each other on a much deeper level and to literally learn one another's songs and dances, in both partying and worshipping. It was utterly joyous.

Lance Pape sums up this experience: "In the role of host we find ourselves strengthened in our own faith by these "little ones" who carry no money in their belt, no health insurance card in their purse. They cast themselves upon us in trust, and so create a cherished opportunity for the settled church to offer a simple cup of water to its Christ."

During the coming weeks we will be reviewing the many different strands of our ministry here that involve welcome and hospitality and furthering our explorations of hosting in both formal and informal ways. In doing so, we seek to further explore and celebrate the ways in which we are able to create spaces where relationships can develop and our faith can deepen. Whatever your means and resources, in terms of time and money, there will be plenty of opportunities to help create spaces in which relationships can develop. I urge you to get involved.

So today we give thanks for the everyday encounters with Christ that open us further to the transcendent: for glasses of cold water, for conversation and prayer. It's a model suggested by Philip Larkin's poem, Water.

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.

Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;

My litany would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader