



Hospitality as resistance

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Today, as you've heard, we are marking in our Eucharist, the last week of the Westminster Winter Shelter, which we at St James's are part of. For one night a week, and our night is Tuesdays, we welcome guests for a hot meal, to sleep over night in the church and have breakfast the next day. And a number of churches and synagogues take part, offering this hospitality on a different night of the week. Our guests, who are homeless this winter, are referred to us by the West London Day Centre, a Methodist project not far from here. This is not a separate thing that happens at St James's on a Tuesday when most people are here on Sundays – it's a core expression of our Eucharistic life as a church and so today we're going to hear from three of our volunteers who have been part of this year's Shelter.

<VOLUNTEERS' TESTIMONY FROM JACK, JEN, JULIA>

On the face of it, today's gospel, the gospel story about the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant, may not seem to have much to say about the work that this church

does along with other churches and the West London Synagogue in the Winter Shelter. But I want to suggest that it does.

The centurion is a man with much power. Probably promoted from the ranks, and in charge of about 100 soldiers, as an officer in an occupying army, he was certainly capable of ordering Jesus to come to his house and perform the service he wanted. Instead, we get a little insight into this soldier's life; he is sufficiently concerned about his slave that he reaches out to Jesus to ask him to heal him – but he also helped to build a new synagogue for the people he was occupying – so we get the impression that he is a kind man, exercising humility while being part of the occupying army.

He could have ordered Jesus to his house but his message, sent to Jesus, has become one of the best known in the gospels; *Lord, I am not worthy to have you under my roof but only say the word and let my servant be healed.*

Having other people come *under our roof*, going to visit other people – is something that looks like a normal part of adult life,

but the truth is that it's not always straightforward or easy. Inviting people to come to your flat, to your room, to your house; or going to visit other people in their homes – is an ordinary part of life but is often emotionally complex. Because alongside being an exchange of generosity or kindness, the human interaction of hospitality is also an exchange of power. His comment acknowledges that in the exercise of hospitality, a power dynamic is at work. It gets to the root of some of our deepest insecurities and most judgemental instincts.

So Jesus knew what he was talking about, he knew that he would touch an emotional nerve when he told so many stories about being either a host or a guest. He told stories of everyone's worst nightmare – inviting people to come to your party and then no one turning up. He told a story of a man going to a party dressed in the wrong clothes, he told stories of invitations being issued to total strangers to join a wedding. And one party I have sometimes imagined, with a bit of a shiver, is the party that the father throws for his prodigal son when he gets home – can you imagine being the son at that party, having lost your family's money – with everyone there knowing what you've done – shamed - yet being the centre of attention at a lavish gathering your parents insist you attend. The guts that it might have taken to attend that meal is the kind of courage it takes to be a guest where you think people are pitying you. Receiving kindness often feels much harder than giving it.

This theme – of being a guest or being a host – touches on deep emotional instincts – and we often judge ourselves wanting.

Are you a good host? There's a whole lot of decisions to make if you want to be; what to cook, how to make people feel comfortable in your space. If your flat is your fortress, if your room is your safe space, then there are risks involved in asking people to come and join you there; you are opening yourself to others' assessment of

your space and how you have arranged it or what you can afford. You open yourself to others seeing how your family life is, what your relationship is like with your children, or how you live alone. Inviting someone into your space, however small or big it is, can touch very deep themes of pride and shame, guilt and desire.

Being a guest is no less complex – shall I take a gift for my host and if so what? Will I like what I'm given to eat? There is a loss of control involved in being a guest – and many of us will try to wrestle back control by saying in advance (not withstanding allergies) what we will eat or drink. As a guest, you are in someone else's space and you are subject to their control of timing, atmosphere, food and drink. And with mobile phones a daily reality, there is always the opportunity as there wasn't in previous generations, to back out at the last minute, send a quick text – sorry - something's come up, when we can't quite face it. It's a common temptation.

It's also said that in London, we are much more prepared to travel on the tube for half an hour to have a meal with people who agree with us rather than attempt to eat with our actual neighbours. Hospitality is, in contemporary London, very often exercised differently – people meet in neutral spaces more likely than in homes – where power is shared more equally - in coffee shops, bars and restaurants and the park.

But hospitality is at the heart of all we are and do as a church because it's our main way of relating to each other in the Eucharist: this holy meal where we eat and drink together. This Eucharistic hospitality is offered without strings. Whether you take communion or not here, you are very welcome – no one is forced to eat and drink together. But you are invited. You are invited – as I am invited – and our task is to decide to say yes, and then to decide, as it were, to try not to back out by text.

Every Sunday we are guests at this Eucharist and Christ is our host. And so we know what it is like to be a guest.

Every Sunday we are also hosts – and as hosts, it is our role to make newcomers feel welcome and comfortable by going and finding someone you don't know to talk to over coffee.

These themes of hospitality are really not easy but they are central to Christian life.

And so our Night Shelter isn't a separate thing that some people do during the week, but a key expression of the heart of our life and mission as a Christian community.

There are other ways we try to be hospitable at St James's, located as we are by Piccadilly Circus: we together make a commitment spiritual, financial and strategic as a church to keep our church doors open for all comers for as much of every day as much as we possibly can. Most mornings at 8 when we open, there are people waiting to come in and most evenings at 7 or later when we close, there are people here that we ask to leave. We also provide Bibles in the pews – we don't have any here today because they've all gone – we put a welcome notice in the cover letting them know that the central message of the gospel is Love – and letting them know that they are welcome to take them away. And in our visitors' book, and in the prayers left here every day, people express their need, their fear, their love, their anger, their thankfulness in this sacred space. In determining that our church building is open for as much as possible and that it is clean and light and welcoming – this is a signal that there is no story that cannot be told here. There is no human complexity that cannot be laid at the foot of the cross, that cannot be brought to this altar.

I met with someone recently who has been coming to this church for over twenty years. He has been coming for over twenty years once a week but no one here will ever have

met him. Once a week on the same day every week, ever since his mother died, he comes to light a candle and sit quietly. We met to talk because he is getting a little older and he has discovered he is afraid to die. We talked of this fear together in this sacred space he knows so well which has held him and welcomed him for so many years.

The commitment of Christian community to welcome people whoever they are, requires resilience and courage: as one advocate of Christian hospitality says:

“Although we often think of hospitality as a tame and pleasant practice, Christian hospitality has always had a subversive, countercultural dimension. ‘Hospitality is resistance,’ as one person from the Catholic Worker observed. Especially when the larger society disregards or dishonors certain persons, small acts of respect and welcome are potent far beyond themselves. They point to a different system of valuing and an alternate model of relationships.”

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, Christine Pohl William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999 page 61

Forming a community for one night a week on a Tuesday, knowing that we are taking part in a much larger community of churches and synagogues, and welcoming too Muslim volunteers this year from the organisation City Circle, means that we are attempting in a very small way, to provide this kind of *hospitality as resistance* in a culture that often prefers gatherings of the like-minded.

It's risky, inviting and being invited, for all the reasons I mentioned at the beginning – but it is nothing less than joining in the work of Christ – who both invites us and asks to be invited into our lives as both host and guest. It doesn't remain therefore a cool intellectual idea – or an idea we assent to one day a week and then ignore for the rest of it. It's a way of life – it's not easy – to

remain open to one another, to risk rejection, to face down fear, and to know that we move from our roles as host and guest from one moment to another. In a Christian understanding of hospitality, we are all guests and we are all hosts; in the practice of hospitality, a central teaching of Jesus is affirmed; there is no us and them. There is only us.

“Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines...The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free...Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”

Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life Henri Nouwen p71

In marking the end of the Shelter for this year, we thank our guests for their company and creativity, we thank those who have cooked and washed up, and played music and games and slept in the pews and cooked breakfast and prayed. We reaffirm that this church building, historic and beautiful as it is, is kept beautiful not as a museum but as a sacred place for, amongst other things, people to find respite from a life lived outside. We affirm too that

hospitality, expressed in the humble way of the centurion, is a way of life that we will want to find ever more creative ways of living out.

For example, there will be a notice today for example from the group who went to a wider meeting in our Diocese recently about churches welcoming refugees – so do get involved.

We know that when we approach another human being, we approach holy ground: we know too that in expressing hospitality, and being willing to receive it, our own need for healing human relationships is exposed and we know that we are, to use the jargon, vulnerable adults ourselves.

This realisation doesn't mean that we fall into inertia or despair; quite the opposite. And it doesn't mean that we try to deny the power or subdue the responsibilities that we inevitably have. But it does mean that we commit ourselves to mirror Christ's life of kenosis. We acknowledge our power, and, like the centurion, use it wisely to give ourselves away.

We know our own need of healing, and we get stronger and more courageous at accepting ourselves before God. And then we are ready, like the centurion, the most unlikely of models for discipleship, to be able to say to our homeless guests, our visitors and to one another, the same as we say to Christ at this Eucharist and as I myself say it to you now:

I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed.

Amen.