

Martin White. 16th November, 2008. Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 14:7-11

Who should we invite for dinner?

In case anyone hasn't picked this up yet; we have been talking over recent weeks about community and hospitality and fellowship.

And last week I spoke about the issue of hospitality – looking at whether there is a biblical idea of hospitality – and I said that although different cultures may express hospitality in different ways, I believe that there are some essential ingredients that the Bible points to.

And there's a neat way to summarise this, which is:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, (Matthew 7:12)

And:

'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22:39)

And I really don't think we need to know every detail about what is the correct thing to do culturally as long as we are putting this into practice!

In the Crown over the last few years, we have had people from cultures where you greet people with three kisses; we have had other people who would greet each other with two kisses; other people would hug, others would shake hands; and there are other people who would not feel at all comfortable with any physical greeting – especially between different sexes.

I don't think we need to get this right perfectly; I do think we need to welcome each other and honour one another and think of each other more highly than we think of ourselves and out of loving our neighbours as we love ourselves, we will want to know more about each other's cultures. And if we are acting towards each other out of love and honour and warmth, then I think we'll get it more or less right as a church.

If love and honouring each other is not at the heart of what we do, it doesn't matter whether we are culturally perfect or not; it will always be less than a Christian greeting.

If you cook someone a meal that is really expensive and lavish, and observe every cultural custom, but you aren't acting out of love for them, then it's just food.

My encouragement is that we all hold up this plumb line against our relationships and how we offer hospitality, and that we all, as a church, realign what we do according to this biblical model; whether or not we think we're good at offering hospitality. And for some of us, that will mean big changes; for others, we may just need to alter a few attitudes.

What I am not saying is that the Westerners here need to catch up with the Panjabis and the Latinos need to catch up with the Tamils and the Iranians need to copy the Polish.

What I am saying is that we all need to submit ourselves to the Bible and all grow together towards its model for us.

So last week we looked at what Biblical hospitality is; this week I want to look at who it's for.

1. Family

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God... If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1Timothy 5:3-4, 8)

In the Greek, this is literally "if anyone does not provide for his own people and especially family..."

Tell these things to the people so that they will do the right thing in their extended family. Anyone who neglects to care for family members in need repudiates the faith. That's worse than refusing to believe in the first place. (The Message)

We have a responsibility to our families – ‘especially for our immediate family’ – however we measure that; our own flesh and blood.

God is for families – He put honouring them – fathers and mothers, in His Law and if we do, the 5th Commandment says, ‘it will go well with us.’

I don’t believe that it’s okay for us to care for other people and neglect our own immediate family... but neither do I believe that it’s okay to care for our families and no-one else.

2. The Family of Believers

Galatians 6 says this:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:10)

God has placed each of us in families; but He has also placed us in a larger, Church family.

And it’s not just that we’re to be a bit like a family; in God’s eyes, we are one.

And as family, we are to practice hospitality and do good to one another.

When in Acts 2 and 4 it talks about the Believers sharing their possessions and there being no needy people among them, it sounds amazing! I think it came out of a true understanding of the fact that they really were family together: It’s what you do in families.

And in fact, what the Believers did in Acts 2 just sounds like a family together – being devoted to fellowship and breaking bread etc.

The amazing thing is that naturally speaking they were diverse and divided, but under God’s Fatherhood and in His Household, they were joined beyond all their diversity and division into His Family.

3. Strangers

But it doesn't stop there. As well as sharing hospitality with our 'flesh and blood family' and our church family, God also calls us to go further – as we saw last week:

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (Hebrews 13:1-3)

As well as loving each other as brothers (and sisters), God's plan for hospitality, as we saw last week, also extends to strangers.

God welcomed us as strangers, so it reflects something of His character when we do the same.

When I went to Romania a number of years ago, I was welcomed in and shown amazing hospitality by complete strangers. In fact, they offered me the most generous hospitality I have ever received from people. And I felt fully welcomed into their family.

There wasn't suspicion, or bargaining, or a sense of anyone hoping to get anything out of it – it was simply pure, grace-filled, holy, God-honouring, Christian fellowship and hospitality – and it was wonderful!

We are part of a new Family – this is what our family does. And Jesus told and showed us some more of what our new Family does by telling us who else to aim our hospitality at: It is an including family that welcomes in strangers, and also, it especially welcomes:

4. People who can't pay us back

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or 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." (Luke 14:12-14)

I don't think that Jesus means here that we should turn our backs on our families – in fact when Isaiah talks about True Fasting, he says specifically that what's acceptable to God is remembering our own families too:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
...Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

It's more good economic sense that Jesus is talking about:

If we serve, give to and share hospitality with people who will invite us round next week, the returned hospitality is our reward;

But when we serve, give to and share hospitality with people who can't repay us now, then it will be God who rewards us.

He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward him for what he has done. (Proverbs 19:17)

Jesus talks a lot about this and says something amazing about it in Matthew 25:

"Then (on the Day of Judgment) the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34-40)

If you want the honour of serving Jesus and having a meal with Him and showing kindness to Him, then open your home and show hospitality to someone who is never going to repay you in a million years – and then you'll be serving Jesus.

When I was growing up, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was most people's idea of what a Christian should be like – she died in 1997, after spending most of her life caring for the sick and dying; looking after lepers and people from the slums around Calcutta.

One journalist visited and was repulsed by what he saw and asked how she could do what she did.

She said that when she cleaned the sores on a leper – she saw Jesus.

If we serve and show kindness and hospitality to 'The Least'; people who can't repay us – then Jesus said that **whatever** we do will be credited to His account and we'll be serving Him.

There is one final category of people who Jesus said we should be thinking about if we want to be perfect in our hospitality:

5. Our enemies

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

God blesses the evil and the good; the righteous and the unrighteous – his friends and His enemies.

If we're going to be like Him – to truly have the Family traits, then we need to do what He does.

And when we do this, it shows something of what our Father is like.

When the first missionaries, including a Methodist called Robert Rundle, came to Alberta, Canada, they were savagely opposed by a young chief of the Cree Indians named Maskepetoon. At their first meeting he declared "I will never become a Christian as long as there are horses to steal and scalps to take."

But he responded to the gospel and accepted Christ. Shortly afterwards, he led a risky peace delegation to the Cree's enemies – the neighbouring Blackfoot. A War-Party of Blackfoot attacked them and killed everyone except Maskepetoon and his grandson.

Maskepetoon made no effort to defend himself; so the war party stopped shooting, recognised who it was, and gathered around him. They saw that he was holding something in his hand – a Bible translated into Cree and asked what it was. he said "It is the word of the Great Spirit; It is his will that we meet as brothers today." They made a temporary peace treaty and Maskepetoon went into the Blackfoot camp.

When he arrived in the camp, he saw a man who had murdered his father years earlier. He demanded that he be brought before him. Confronting the guilty man, he said, "You have killed my father, so now you must be my father. You shall ride my best horse and wear my best clothes. Tell your people that this is the way Maskepetoon takes revenge."

In utter amazement and remorse his enemy exclaimed, "My son, now you have killed me!" He meant, of course, that the hate in his own heart had been completely erased by the forgiveness and kindness of the Indian chief.

In 1869, there was much discontent and resentment against the white men. The McDougalls, aware of the trouble, planned to invite all the tribes to a great summer camp, presumably to hold a buffalo hunt. In fact, McDougall wanted the Crees to meet the missionaries, school teachers, and Hudson's Bay officials to discuss their grievances and learn the plans of the government for them. Maskepetoon decided to seek the co-operation of the Blackfoot. Carrying a white flag and a bible, he and his sons went to the Blackfoot camp. Within a few hours, they were murdered. <http://www.smokylake.com/history/missions/menoftheforest.htm>

I have preached before about the word "Huios" which means "Son".

In Jewish culture, a father would train his son in the family business, to have integrity and work hard and be godly.

Once he had passed tests, his father would be able to trust him to speak on his behalf. The father would then present him before the village and say "This is my beloved son; with him I am well pleased."

From this point on, the son would be able to speak on behalf of the father; if the son made a business deal, it would be as if you were making the deal with the father.

So our call as Christians is to practice hospitality – to our own flesh and blood family; to our Church family.

If we can go further and show hospitality to strangers, then we may entertain angels.

If we can go further and show hospitality to people who aren't in a position to repay us, then we will be showing that hospitality to Jesus Himself

And if we can go even further and even extend hospitality to our enemies – people who hate us; people who have hurt us; then God is pleased to call us Sons – because we are doing what He would do, and acting like a true, trusted, mature member of His Family.

I want to finish with a few last verses from 3 John. This is a letter from John to a Christian called Gaius, who has welcomed and given hospitality to some Christians who he hadn't previously met, as they passed through his town. John writes to thank him for his partnership in the Gospel

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. (3 John 1:5)

My prayer for the Crown is that people we meet – whoever they are, will be able to say of us that “we worked together for the truth” and that we showed hospitality “in a manner worthy of God.”