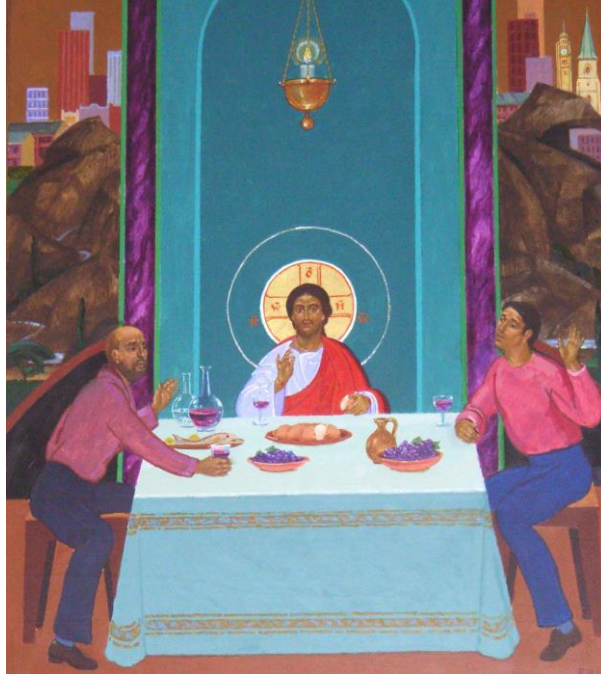


# Hospitality



What might hospitality mean for a follower of Jesus?

Hospitality needs to affect every part of our lives, our words and actions. This includes meals, listening, speaking, being open and welcoming to friends, strangers, fresh ideas and different ways of looking at things. Hospitality can direct Christians how to relate to people and nature in our world.

The painting above by Australian artist Earle Backen hangs in the church of Christ Church St Laurence, Sydney. It is a modern presentation of the meal at Emmaus, where the risen Jesus, a stranger met along the road, was given hospitality - a guest, who became host (Luke 24:13-32).

In the gospels, Jesus often participated in meals, sometimes as host when feeding crowds on a hillside or seashore, or as a guest of Pharisees, friends such as Martha and Mary, and those on the edges of society, tax-collectors and sinners.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was both host, and the bread and wine shared. This meal is remembered and re-lived at every Communion Service when we, who are invited guests, become hosts welcoming Christ into ourselves, our bodies, and then returning to our world, to give our lives for others.

Participating in the Eucharist each Sunday is a valued and important experience for many Christians, but not always physically possible. I was told recently of an elderly gentleman who lived alone and was sometimes housebound when no one was able to take him out. One Sunday, when he could not get to Church, he decided to have his own Church service, sharing his morning cup of tea and biscuit in Communion with his Lord. After a while, he realised that he did not have to wait until Sunday for such a Communion, and it became a regular and treasured time each morning.

This Christian man shared his meal with the Lord he loved, and by so doing, shared his life and love with many others in and through Jesus. Does this mean that all meals can become times of respectful and loving hospitality shared with Christ and all creation, human and nature?

To eat with friends or strangers is an opportunity of sharing space and time with others, respecting them in conversations when no one person dominates, and all able to speak and be listened to attentively. Carefully prepared food is also respected and thankfully received. After a shared meal, participating bodies are united, fed by the same food, drink and words. Hosts, guests and food are interwoven in the one event of hospitality.

But hospitality involves more than meals, it asks us to make room in every part of our lives for others, especially those in need. In Matthew 25:31-46, people described as showing compassion for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and prisoner were astounded when told afterwards they had ministered to Christ. They had only seen a fellow human being, a child of God like themselves, in need of help. Our hospitality may be just a smile offered to another whose eye we unexpectedly catch as we pass in the street, or it may be more demanding, as when we stop what we are doing, and take time and effort to care for a person in distress.

Some years ago, I was sitting on a roadside waiting for a friend near a remote Aboriginal Community in the Northern Territory, when an elderly Aboriginal

woman walked by. She stopped, and then came over and sat beside me. She could easily have ignored me. Instead, although she spoke only her Aboriginal language, which I did not understand, she started a conversation in which we both communicated by drawing pictures in the dirt to illustrate our words. This woman showed compassion to me a stranger. In the gospels, Jesus showed 'compassion' to others, a word in the Greek meaning, 'loving a stranger'.

When we as a church offer hospitality to strangers, those on the margins of society, and in need of food, clothing, a home and friendship, we have the opportunity to share the pain and sorrows as well as joys of people different from ourselves. Such hospitality will change our lives if we, even reluctantly, make room in our settled comfortable life for others to belong and be one of us, people who are both like us and unlike us, and can disturb us.

Every meeting with people, every shared meal, every challenge from strangers, every memory of past friends and every prayer for the sick, brings others into our lives and provides an opportunity for us to obey Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves. When we offer hospitality and compassion to others, make room for them and accept the changes they will inevitably bring, we shall find that we are also being ministered to by them.

It seems that basically we humans need each other and, in a way, exist for each other. Also, when we, individually and as a church, engage in hospitality, we experience something of the all-embracing compassionate love that is God.

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