

## Sermon on Hospitality & the Letter to the Hebrews

Having preached on communion and Paul's letter to the Corinthians 2 weeks ago, I would like to focus on hospitality and the Letter to the Hebrews today.

On that Communion Sunday a fortnight ago we sang "...as Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends. The love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends, and strangers now are friends." (I come with joy MH 617)

And this is where the sermon I preached then and the sermon I am preaching today are linked together: at the point where strangers become friends.

During my research about hospitality in the NT, and especially in the Letter to the Hebrews, I came across a definition of hospitality by Henri Nouwen. Henri Nouwen defines hospitality as the offer of a space where "change can take place", a space where "the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." Today the word enemy may be a bit puzzling for us living in a peaceful country in a modern world. But let us take a closer look at the situation of those Christians to whom the Letter to the Hebrews was originally sent.

The Letter to the Hebrews called on believers to make a bold commitment to Christ in the face of public abuse, imprisonment and the loss of their property (10: 32-34). They should not give in to discouragement and weariness but should continue to contend for the faith (12: 1-4).

The Letter to the Corinthians can be dated in the 50ies of the first century; the Letter to the Hebrews in the 60ies, about 10 years later. The Letter to the Hebrews was directed to Jewish Christians ("to the Hebrews" means the same as "to the Jews").

We have no idea where these Hebrews, these Jewish-Christians lived. What we know is that they had come to faith through the preaching and teaching of those who had heard Jesus (2:3-4; 13:7). They had been believers for some time, possibly even for as long as 30 years (13:7). But their faith in Christ was being undermined by intense persecution.

No one really knows who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews. But what we know is that the author longs to encourage the weakening Hebrew Christians by pointing them to Jesus as the fulfilment of the OT covenant, and as the fulfilment of their lives.

He or she encourages the readers to persevere in the faith in the face of persecution, uses a lot of examples of heroes and heroines of the faith, and ends by explaining the role of discipline and giving them some practical advice for living the Christian life.

This early church of Jewish Christians had already suffered one round of persecution. They had been chased from their houses and businesses and were helpless to stop the destruction of their homes. They had been scorned and abused while spectators jeered at and insulted them.

Some members of the community had been thrown into prison where they faced brutal and inhuman conditions. Such prisoners were completely dependent on the aid and assistance of community members on the outside for food, drink, clothing and bedding. "Remember those who are in prison..." (13:3).

And the community had attended faithfully to them, even though they risked imprisonment themselves for their caring and hospitable actions. “For you had compassion for those who were in prison...” (10:34).

Throughout the first wave of persecution, this community of Hebrew Christian believers had managed to remain faithful to Jesus and to each other. But now they were facing another wave of hostility and persecution. And they could not be sure whether they’d manage to stay as steadfast as before.

Persecution was an ongoing reality for the followers of Jesus, who himself was persecuted, tortured and crucified.

Persecution is a reality for many people outside this fairly safe country today. Some of the things that happened in that early church could just as well be taken from yesterday’s newspaper...

If we had time to read through some early chapters from the Book of Acts, the biblical book which reports the development of the early church, we’d discover one story of persecution after another.

Just shortly after the fascinating events at Pentecost, Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned. In the next chapter the same thing happens again. Then we are told of Stephen’s death by stoning. Then we read of numerous believers being persecuted, forced to become refugees, or being imprisoned. The followers of Jesus were scattered all over the Mediterranean world; some brave friends managed to bury Stephen, scared to death that they themselves could be the next to be killed.

It goes on and on...

And in the midst of all their fear and despair comes this sermon like text to remind them that they stood firm the first time, showing courage, bravery and fidelity to their faith and their fellow believers.

Only this time they are reacting differently; instead of facing persecution bravely again, the young Christians turn inward, retreat into safety, give up withstanding their oppressors.

They had given practical evidence of their faith for so long, but it had cost them too much. They were at risk of slipping back into a life without Jesus.

In the face of their weakening defence the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages the demoralised community to keep going. “But we are not among those who shrink back...” (10: 38), instead their strategy must be offensive, outgoing, assertive.

And in Hebrews 13 we find specifics about how to be assertive and outgoing. One of the topics is “to show hospitality.” “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” In that context hospitality is a word filled with images of radical faith, action and witness.

Nowadays hospitality often has an image of tea and cookies, soft sweet kindness, dinner parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of cosiness.

In our time the concept of such Christian hospitality as mentioned in the text to the Hebrews has probably lost much of its power and seriousness.

In the days of the early Christians the hospitality they were encouraged to practice was a risky thing to do. And it could hold potential danger for those who were the hosts.

But then, they all had a long tradition of considering hospitality a religious task, something that God wanted them to do, and something that would please God extraordinarily.

In the Greek world there was this tale of Zeus being a tired wanderer in the human world who eventually brought great blessings to the people who'd showed hospitality to him – not knowing who they were entertaining.

And you all must know the Jewish tradition expressed in that OT story of Abraham and Sarah hosting those three strangers who at the end of the day turn out to be messengers from God (Gen 18).

Hospitality in the Bible always has the same basic elements:

welcome, a gesture of honour, time spent together, washing feet, especially prepared food, water, rest in the shade, shelter, a place to stay for the night, and a blessing.

And as an observant Jew Jesus shows exactly such elements of hospitality when he shares food and table fellowship – but also when he meets the Samaritan woman at the well. He has bread for the crowds, and offers living water to any who are thirsty.

But back to the Hebrews:

the commandment to hospitality wants the Christian community to remain open, and not close itself off from the stranger. The Greek word for hospitality consists of two words: love and stranger. So being hospitable means loving the stranger with genuine Christian love.

In the case of our persecuted Christian Jewish community this may well mean: not to barricade their doors to protect themselves, but, like Abraham in the old story, to go forth and welcome the stranger with open arms – a most vulnerable position which leaves the host completely unguarded.

If you remember the definition of hospitality by Henri Nouwen that I offered at the beginning of this sermon, hospitality is the offer of a space where change can take place, where the stranger can enter and become a friend.

And it is in such space, even in a context of hostility and persecution, that there is a great opportunity for spreading the good news, for making known in word and deed how gracious and hospitable God is. Preaching the good news throughout the history of the church, preaching the good news for every church in any context, must be grounded in hospitality to strangers!

...not in persuading, forcing, overwhelming, converting people, but in welcoming, inviting, sharing and showing our faith by our actions.

From church history we know how often the churches have sadly failed in understanding hospitality as the most important part of their mission.

Christianity was often forced on non-Christians. And we can only be ashamed about that. We can confess these sins of the past, we can apologize for them. And

we can understand it all better today: we can propose our faith rather than impose it on others. We can be welcoming and inviting and leave it to those who come, to choose what they like for themselves.

So let us understand our service this morning as word and deed. The doors are open, the good news is preached, welcome is offered, food and drink – “a place in the shade to rest and share...”

Gustavo Gutierrez, a Latin American theologian, writes “only from the level of practice, from action can the preaching by word be understood. In the act of doing, our faith is made truth, and not only for others, but for ourselves as well.”

I think we all know this, don't we.

What we do can be as important as what we say.

And the good we do, is not only good for others, it can be a blessing for ourselves as well, it can help us feel true and worthy, and it can give us a purpose in life.

Gustavo Gutierrez explains that without actions the word can have many different interpretations... It is our deeds that at the end of the day, show the world what our words really mean.

The basic elements of showing our faith by words and actions are the same – then and now: an open door, a warm welcome, food and drink on the table, shelter and sharing, and a blessing – and we do all these actions not to show how wonderful we are as individuals or as a community, but to witness to Jesus Christ, our love for him, our loyalty to him.

So far, so good.

Only – what about our worries about practical, individual hospitality? Should we not worry any longer, because we are believing Christians?

Some well known scholars have taken this question very seriously and done some research on it.

In a book with the title “Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition” I read the following: “People have always worried about the risks and dangers in welcoming strangers. Often we think in the old days hospitality to strangers was easier and safer...” It wasn't.

A few lines further on the same writer states clearly, how in NT times the community provided hospitality – rather than just an individual or a family by itself.

In the OT hospitality often begins in a public place, and only then was the stranger (who has by then started to become a friend) invited to an individual home.

“Welcoming total strangers is difficult when there is no community setting in which the initial relationship can be established, one theologian writes.

And I guess what this NT scholar is saying, is: it is a great chance to be a church community and meet in the church with all the members and friends around. It is safer, easier, more relaxed than opening an individual home. (I am not saying, we shouldn't do this ☺).

And, whatever may prevent us from opening our home (maybe we don't have enough space or chairs or plates or money to host guests, maybe we are a family full of differences, maybe our place is most of the time a big mess, maybe we feel inadequate as a host or a cook... - that is all understandable), let us simply open our church and be open as a community.

Let us meet here.

Let us meet here more often.

Let us offer more opportunities to meet and share and build up relationships.

Let us bring along what we have (5 loaves of bread and two fish to still the hunger of the crowd☺), and we will all discover what blessing lies in sharing.

Let us offer the space where change can take place, where the stranger can enter and become a friend.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

We have hosted quite a number of angels here in the past few years, don't you agree? Some stayed for a short time, some stayed for long, some are still here, some moved on...

And it all started with an open door, a warm “Hello, how are you?” and a cup of coffee after the service...

MH 617: I come with joy...