

What next?

Hospitality needs to be expressed and experienced at many different levels in our relations with people of different faiths. A few practical suggestions you might like to consider:

Arrange a visit to a mosque, temple, gurdwara, synagogue or other place of worship, so that you can have the experience of being the guest of another community of faith

Work out what steps your church could take to invite people from other faiths to worship or social events, and to ensure that they are hospitably treated when they come.

Join a local inter faith group where you can learn from each other's ways of showing welcome to those from a different community. If no group exists, see if one might be established.

Build up a real friendship with a person or a family from another faith community, as a host invite them to your house, as go as a guest to their house.

Challenge the attitudes of individuals – colleagues, family or friends – who stigmatise those recently arrived in our society, and register complaints against press coverage of other communities which is divisive, sensational and stereotyped.

Carry out an audit of your church or Christian organisation to see how genuinely hospitable it is towards outsiders.

Co-operate with people of other faiths and others of good will in your neighbourhood in projects to welcome asylum seekers, refugees, and others who are new to our society.

Churches Together in England
27 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HH
Charity Registration Number 1110782

HOSPITALITY OF THE HEART

Four Bible studies

by Michael Ipgrave

for Churches Together in England
Churches' Agency for Inter Faith Relations in Scotland
and the Inter Faith Network of CYTÛN

November 2004

Hospitality of the Heart

Christian faith speaks of a God who through outgoing love welcomes us as strangers into the heart of the divine fellowship, and who commends this pattern of hospitality as a model to be followed by us also. This poses particular challenges to us in a society where we live among people of many different faiths. How does the divine imperative of hospitality challenge us to invite our neighbour into the heart of our Christian life together? This is the question posed to us in different ways in the four biblical passages offered here –

Genesis 18.1-8, telling of how human beings can in turn welcome God as a guest;

Deuteronomy 26.4-11, reminding us to honour the resident alien among and within us;

Luke 13.23-29, proclaiming the universal scope of God's own generosity extended to all people; and

James 2.1-7, bringing before us the particular importance of showing hospitality to the poor.

A genuine hospitality of the heart will start from the premise that there is no inner sanctum of the life of Christian faith within which the presence of 'the other' is not to be welcomed. An approach like this, focusing on the experience of the Christian community as host for people of other faiths, needs to be seen alongside, and complementary to, the equally important experience of being invited as guests into the heart of other faith communities. Behind all this, there lies a more inclusive vision of people of all faiths being together guests of the divine host whose home is the entire world.

Notes: *The context is that of a marginalised and minority group, set in a class-ridden society, and gathered in a religious assembly. The word used is synagogue. James draws on the traditions of Jewish wisdom literature to insist that the Christian community should show no partiality just as the God it worships shows no partiality.*

The letter goes on (2.9f) to describe failure to show hospitality to the poor in this way as sin which is to be judged by the law of God – in fact, this is identified as a test by which the reality of Christian's faith is to be measured. There is a strong emphasis on the inwardness of real worth: external clothing, the sign of worldly riches, means nothing to God. Conversely, the hospitality that God expects of believers is to be something that flows from the heart.

The poor man is spoken to in two brusque imperatives: 'Stand!' 'Sit!' Ordering people around like this immediately shows an ungracious and inhospitable attitude. The love which God's people are to show must be expressed in the language of invitation and of welcome.

Questions

- 1 Who are the poor who come into the lives of our Christian communities? Are they really made welcome?
- 2 What criteria do we use to judge people? Are we able to recognise the inwardness of true faith towards God in people who are different from us?
- 3 Do we alienate or offend people by the language we use in communicating with them? Do we speak in different tones as churches to those who share our culture and to those who are different from us?

HOSPITALITY TOWARDS THE POOR

James 2.1-7

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be the rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

How to use these studies

First read through the passage aloud, slowly and attentively. The brief notes accompanying the texts are not intended as a commentary, but simply to stimulate discussion of the passage in the light of your experience. Similarly, the questions suggested are not designed to exhaust its meaning, but to help in relating it to your own situation.

If you are using this booklet in a group, spend some time sharing the ways in which the passage speaks to you. If you are using it as an individual, try to think of several different aspects of your life and the life of your church and community where it has an application. You may want to come back to the passage several times during the course of each study session – the scriptures do not reveal all their truths at once. Each passage should be studied in this way for up to an hour.

These general questions may be helpful when looking at each of the passages in relation to other faith communities:

- How do these biblical experiences relate to my own context?
- What is the relevance of this passage to inter faith relations?
- How does this text enlarge my understanding of hospitality?
- How might people of other faiths read this passage?

You may find it helpful to record any key points that emerge from your study, but remember that it is not necessary to provide a complete record of everything that is said or thought.

Thanks: to New Revised Standard Version Bible 1989, National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, used by permission. These Bible Studies are based on Material developed by the Churches Commission on Inter Faith Relations, whose co-operation is gratefully acknowledged.

HOSPITALITY TOWARDS GOD

Genesis 18.1-8

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Notes: *The image by which Jesus describes the Kingdom is that of the Messianic banquet of the end time. All will be invited to share in God's hospitality, in a feast which reaches across the boundaries of geography and history. When we celebrate the eucharist, we anticipate that heavenly banquet here and now.*

The passage opens with a short dialogue about salvation. The 'someone' who approaches Jesus wants to know about the destiny of other people, but the Lord turns the question around. He reminds the questioner that mere familiarity with the Saviour is not enough to guarantee salvation.

God's hospitality, like all hospitality, cannot be presumed on; it needs to be accepted with the accepting attitude of a guest. These verses foreshadow the longer parable of the wedding banquet (Lk 14.15-24), in which repeated refusal of the divine offer of hospitality brings judgement on God's people. Like that parable, they ask us to be open to God's gracious invitation, which can come to us through our neighbour.

Questions

- 1 How often do we allow ourselves to be the guests of people who are different from us? Can we experience such situations as showing God's hospitality to us?
- 2 Is there a danger of debasing hospitality through taking it for granted? What can we do to prevent this happening?
- 3 How important is the question of the salvation of other people for us in our Christian discipleship?

GOD'S HOSPITALITY TOWARDS ALL

Luke 13.23-29

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Notes: *The precise identification of the three visitors is not clear from this text. Gen 19.1 has 'two angels', suggesting that this passage may imply the Lord plus two attendants. Heb13.2 appears to refer to this episode in describing those who 'entertain angels without knowing it'. Later Christian exegesis interprets the three as the Trinity – as, famously, Andrei Rublev's icon of 'The hospitality of Abraham'. Their supernatural status is in any case clear, and the story mirrors ancient myths of gods descending to earth to test humans.*

Abraham and Sarah meet this test through offering the best provisions they have, despite the entirely unannounced nature of the visit. Their hospitality is shown not only in the food they prepare, but also in the time and care they give to addressing their guests' weariness and thirst. The story goes on to describe how their kindness is rewarded by the promise of a son.

Later Jewish commentators noticed that the meal Abraham sets before his guests is not kosher, since it mixes meat and dairy products. The episode is set in a time before the Law is given. It points to Abraham's role as a father of faith for all who turn in hope to the one God.

Questions

- 1 What are the ways in which, and the people through whom, God tests our generosity in giving?
- 2 What preparations do we need to make if we are to be able to show hospitality at unexpected and inconvenient times?
- 3 How do Abraham and Sarah serve for us as patterns of faith and hope in God? Can we share their example with people of other faiths?

HOSPITALITY TOWARDS THE STRANGER

Deuteronomy 26.4-11

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Notes: *The ger or resident alien is frequently remembered in the Torah, along with the orphan, the widow, and (sometimes) the Levite, as somebody lacking the usual protections of society. The Israelites are here reminded that the experience of being a ger is part of their communal story. Their ancestors had travelled as aliens to Egypt. After an initial welcome, the hospitality of the Egyptians had turned to hatred. Now the Lord's people must not repeat the story: they are to show hospitality to the strangers in their midst.*

Some other Hebrew texts are less positive towards aliens, largely on the grounds that their presence pollutes the purity of Israel's faith. There was often particular anxiety about the presence of 'foreign wives' in the community. In later rabbinic exegesis, the meaning of ger was interpreted in a narrow sense to mean Gentiles who had converted to Judaism.

The passage contrasts two different models of ownership. In Egypt, this meant a possessive assertion of control – even to the point of claiming absolute dominion over human souls and bodies. In Israel, ownership is to be received as a gift of God, and requires the owner to share goods with others.

Questions

- 1 Are there people in our society who correspond to the gerim, 'resident aliens', of ancient Israel? How are they treated?
- 2 What are the good things given to us and people like us? Are we happy to share them with people who are different from us?
- 3 What are the experiences of suffering which are remembered in the history of our own community? Do we use those memories to learn the importance of generosity towards others?