



Beyond Politeness: Exploring Christian Hospitality to Strangers and Visitors

Richard E Frazer

Bob is a frightening character. A good deal of the time he is drunk. He has, as a result, a volatile temper and can be prone to alarming mood swings. He is also very heavily built and has a very large and prominent scar on his closely shaved head. If you did not know him he would be the sort of person of whom people would say, “I wouldn’t want to meet him alone on a dark night!” Bob’s story is one amongst many of those seemingly needy, empty-handed strangers who turn out, surprisingly, to be the carriers of priceless gifts to a congregation. In the course of our encounters with Bob, his presence served to extend the frontiers of our theological imagination. He unwittingly served to shape our priorities in ministry and led us to a new and deeper understanding of the compassion of Christ. In learning to be open to people like Bob we were encouraged to revisit the foundational Christian principle that God justifies the ungodly and we were changed in ways we had not imagined.

Bob is neither a “closet theologian” nor a churchgoer. When I first got to know him he was a distressed and suicidal individual with a chaotic lifestyle. He was in and out of trouble, occasionally homeless, profoundly self-destructive and deeply self-loathing. Things came to a head for Bob when his father died very suddenly. The two had a very poor relationship and Bob felt that his own failures and the grief he had given his family may have contributed to his father’s untimely death. He came to our church regularly to drink in the churchyard, but he also came into the church (which is open every day) to sit and pray and think about his father and his life. He told me that he asked God to send his father back so that he might have one last conversation with him and make his peace.

When he began to realise that his wish would not be granted, he made a decisive and destructive decision. A tour guide was waiting to show



some visitors around our historic building and Bob was in an agitated state, making the guide edgy and uneasy. I was asked to come and deal with Bob. He was proving to be an embarrassment. When I arrived I took him to a quiet room out of the way. I discovered that Bob had attempted to commit suicide by consuming a vast cocktail of drugs. As he began to lose consciousness I summoned an ambulance and assisted Bob, who was now swaying violently and almost unable to stand, out into the sanctuary. Our emergence into public view coincided with the moment the tour guide was recounting to a now bewildered band of tourists the deeds of some of the illustrious ministers of the past. I wondered where this act of ministry fitted in with the heroic, magisterial ministries of my predecessors who had been, in their day, major cogs in the wheels of Scotland's civic and religious life. Today's minister, in this cathedral without a bishop, was propping up a miserable and incoherent drunkard. It all seemed a far cry from the idea of church that many people carried around in their heads. I was not sure whether the tour guide would ever manage to recover.

Thankfully, Bob recovered and I found him some days later again in the church, but this time a little calmer. We spoke a little and then he asked me, "will you pray for me?" Of course, I realised at that moment that this was what Bob had been looking for all along. He wanted to know that he could be forgiven for his failed relationship with his father and for the mess he had made of his own life. He needed to hear that renewal and reconciliation was still possible. The prayer proved to be a transforming moment and Bob's eyes spoke deeply to me of someone who had discovered the reality of forgiveness and renewal. He is still not a churchgoer, so far as I know, and indeed the fact that we do not see him about is in one sense a good sign since his presence in the church was always an indication that his life was on the edge. What I do know is that he is living at home with his mother and, as I see him around the community, he gives the appearance of someone getting his life back together. This was not just a transforming moment for Bob, but also for me. I began to see with greater clarity than I had hitherto that even amongst those who were apparently "un-churchy" there could be manifested a deep hunger for Divine acceptance as well as an understanding of the power of prayer to heal.

Stories like these have proved to be a constantly recurring theme in my ministry in our particular context. On any Sunday, up to half of the worshipping congregation are non-affiliated people. This figure rises to 80% at our evening service. This congregation is made up of people who appear to want to come regularly to church but do not wish to join in the traditional way. There are many visitors and students, being close to the University and occasionally those who come to seek refuge or help, like Bob.

Dave was another person who bore all the marks of life upon him. His life had fallen apart when his daughter had been tragically killed in a road accident. He hit the bottle, lost his job and his marriage fell apart. He discovered that he was probably homosexual and descended into a wilderness of dissolution and alcoholism. As I got to know Dave I realised that he felt a strong pull towards the church but felt that the circumstances of his life now meant that he would not be welcome. He had descended too low.

Slowly, over a number of years, the congregation made it possible for Dave to return. He still drank to excess from time to time and he still rarely washed, but he found acceptance in a congregation that had found a way of being accommodating and accepting and he was in church most Sundays. Rather than seeking to change Dave and make him like themselves the congregation were changed themselves. They met Christ in the pain of the outcast, in the suffering of one imprisoned by anguish and alcoholism. They came to see that their role was to offer sanctuary, a safe place in which people can be held in the midst of their pain. People like Dave helped the congregation to see that church is a place where people can be welcomed without being suffocated by chumminess or dragged into helping to do the flowers. They learned that what people need is a place of stillness, a non-judgmental safe space where people can rest in the Spirit of God and find acceptance and renewal. It was not the task of the congregation to work a transformation in Dave to make him more like them, but to allow the Spirit of Christ to work a newness in him (and in us) as we saw Dave find peace at the end of a troubled life.

I thought some of the members of my congregation might have difficulty with a smelly drunk lowering the tone of a fine historic church Sunday by Sunday, but one of them turned up one winter morning with a beautiful woolly sweater she had knitted for Dave with expert loving care. Ironically, the person who did this kindness was the tour guide on the day of Bob's crisis. I feel sure that I misjudged this person at the time. She is full of a genuine tenderness and open hospitality.

Slowly, through many encounters similar to those I have described, we began to understand the value of openness as well as the risks involved. We were coming to realise how dangerous it can be for the church always to seek to remain an association of the like minded where those who did not fit in were inadvertently kept at bay. We were beginning to discover something of the physical threat that strangers could pose and that the outsider can unsettle the equilibrium of our ordered existence. But we were learning that hospitality to strangers was not just politeness but has a deep theological content. The old adage that the function of the church is "to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" was becoming a real and lived experience for us. It was not so much that we were changing the circumstances of those whose lives were chaotic and confused, we were being changed by our encounters with them. It began to occur to us that these troubled people were changing the way we thought about God.

It was stories like these that I brought with me to the Doctor of Ministry summer schools. At this stage I was full of questions and not a little confused. Is all this really ministry, I wondered? What does my congregation think when I get so caught-up in the lives of outsiders? What were the countless outsiders, seeking something from the church, telling us about our post-modern/post-Christian culture? What is the role of the parish church in the modern context where a small band of the faithful support the life of the congregation and a large constituency of people hover on the fringes contributing, it seemed, only their neediness?

“Don’t panic! Stay confused!” that was the worrying and reassuring comment from our tutors that stayed with me in the course of preparing the ground for the Doctor of Ministry Final Project, a written project that involved active research into the practice of my ministry. What was meant by that comment was that whilst real learning is taking place one enters uncertain and new territory that appears at first to be frightening, unfamiliar and confusing. As one becomes accustomed to the new place, the fog lifts and you see the new territory and begin to understand its contours. However, one also begins to see that this is not new territory at all; rather, you are in the same place, but you just see it more clearly. As T.S. Eliot put it,

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time”¹

Two comments I had heard years before had stayed with me. One came from a minister from Chicago during the 1960s when his church had been taken over by civil rights campaigners. He is reported as having said to curious journalists wondering about his reaction to having his church invaded that, “the church exists chiefly for those who are outside it”. Many others have echoed that sentiment. The second comment came from my former bishop during my probationary period. He said that sometimes it was the task of the parish minister to protect those on the fringe of the church from the people at the centre. The Doctor of Ministry was helping to confirm hunches about ministry that I had wrestled with for some time.

Our church was open every day and is an historic and beautiful building, a place of arresting stories, atmosphere and stillness. In spite of what many people think, far from being an object of vandalism and resentment, people genuinely seemed to like and respect the place and to feel that they could approach it. Perhaps that has something to do with it being so old and so beautiful. How were we to make the place appropriately hospitable to all the people who came to us?

For, whatever their reasons, people came. They came to participate in worship, to seek help, sanctuary, stillness and acceptance and sometimes to have a good rant at God or the church because of the injustices of life; others came simply to learn more of its stories. It would be easy to think that our evangelistic task was that of sharing the good news of Christ and turning these strangers into church people like us. What I felt, however was that these people were speaking to us and that somehow, as Jesus himself had said, when you make space for those in need, the prisoner, the homeless and the hungry you meet Jesus in them (see Matthew 25: 31-45). Openness to the stranger was proving to be a source of transforming power and rich blessing for the congregation.

The Doctor of Ministry process encouraged me to see the stranger who appeared in many guises as a recurring theme in my ministry. I began to reflect on the impact these people were having on us as a congregation and moved towards a theological reflection on what all this might mean. My research question was, “What does my congregation think about all these outsiders?” I wanted to find out more about our “congregational culture” and to explore the nature of, as well as the boundaries of, hospitality.

So in addition to conducting this research, we proceeded to make certain moves as a congregation in order to focus our shared ministry, at least in part, on the outsider and the stranger. We thought about hospitality and what constituted appropriate welcoming to the sort of people that came our way. We sought volunteers from the congregation to welcome visitors to the building throughout the week. We began a Junior Choir enlisting children from the local community (much of which is an urban priority area) and gave these children a chance to sing at services in a beautiful setting. We set up an education centre with the intention of welcoming local young people from neighbourhood schools and sharing with them the stories, meaning and mystery of the place. I preached sermons on the theme of hospitality and openness and we found that members of the congregation made it possible for a number of people with mental health problems to feel at home in the congregation. In addition, a number of overseas students



and their families were offered practical support (such as language tuition) and embraced as a part of the worshipping community. We established an emergency food cupboard to help homeless people and employed a number of asylum seekers as beadle and church officers. In addition, we offered sanctuary to one family who had arrived from a war torn region of Africa and were being threatened with deportation by the Home Office. None of these moves were contrived to challenge our culture; they just seemed to be the right thing to do in our circumstances.

In our study and reflection together we shared Biblical and other stories that served to illuminate this recurring theme of what was an appropriate Christian response to the outsider, the stranger, the misfit and the poor. In ways that turned out to be dramatic and far-reaching what had been a somewhat staid and conservative congregation began to change. None of the new moves were life shattering, but they were effecting a transformation. In significant ways the congregation was reaching out more. It was becoming less focused on itself and on maintaining its own dignified worship and, without losing a sense of the centrality of worship, we were welcoming the stranger and being altered, little by little. Our “congregational culture” was changing as we anticipated the blessing that come from open hospitality.

In addition, as I moved to the Final Project phase of the course, I began to interview members of the congregation about their attitudes to these outsiders. This was the qualitative research element of my final project. I set about finding out something of the attitude of my congregation towards outsiders, finding out whether the congregation thought that hospitality to the stranger went beyond mere politeness. I was curious to know the congregation’s attitude towards difficult people who did not fit in. What was the congregation’s idea of the role of its ministry and the role of its minister? Were members of the congregation focused on the needs of fellow members or turned towards the needs of the wider community? Was there any trace at all of theological reflection on this theme?

The answer to these questions revealed a great mixture of attitudes. Some people I interviewed seemed to understand at a deep and intuitive level that open hospitality was Christ's way, whilst others saw hospitality as little more than politeness. Many were quite clear that our place provided a distinctive context in which the congregation itself was a company of strangers, with many people's lives in this gathered context only intersecting at the time of services. Some people had moving stories to tell of their own experience of being accepted and welcomed when they were feeling low, vulnerable and excluded themselves. Perhaps the most interesting thing that happened was that in raising the subject of hospitality we began to reflect on what the implications of hospitality were for us as a particular (though by no means exceptional) Christian congregation in what has often been characterised as a post-modern and post-Christian context.

What ensued was marked and dramatic. A vague notion that hospitality to strangers was a decent Christian virtue now became something we began to see as one of the healthy marks of a living congregation. The process of talking about and researching the topic had far reaching consequences for the life of the congregation. Hospitality that had once been offered in the hope that we might recruit a new regular worshipper to our gathering now became an activity in which we anticipated blessing and transformation that would take us to new and unexpected places and understanding. What we thought we had known (that hospitality was the right thing), we began to see with new eyes (that it was the way in which the Spirit helped people to grow in their understanding of Christ's love). What had been presumed to be familiar territory now had contours and depths we never knew existed. We found ourselves where we began yet were coming to know the place for the first time. We were being challenged to re-imagine the way in which we engaged in our shared public ministry as a consequence of understanding our context more clearly and looking to the Biblical and theological insights that illuminated the specific challenges we faced.

We began to reflect about how intimacy within a congregation can sometimes give to insiders a feeling that they are being friendly and

hospitable whilst that same intimacy actually serves to exclude outsiders. Thinking of ourselves as one big happy family was all very fine for the insiders, but hugely intimidating for the people on the fringe. We saw the dangers of a congregation “seeking only its own” and consequently insulating itself from the strange and the different and robbing the congregation of the promise that Christ might be met when we move beyond the familiar. The Spirit was working a newness in *us* at least as much those who sought sanctuary were being helped and we discovered a new mission frontier for a new millennium.

The writer of Hebrews (13:2) declares, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The same chapter also says, “let us go outside the camp”, referring both to the manner in which Jesus’ ministry was characterised by his association with outsiders and to the way in which he met his own death outside the city gate. Injunctions and invitations such as these involve a certain degree of risk and discomfort that is frequently undertaken reluctantly. Yet the discovery we made in venturing hospitality and going outside the camp is that God is the multiplier of gifts who instigates profitable exchange amongst those with the courage and imagination to be open to the outsider. We began to “meet the Lord” in the faces of the most seemingly unlikely people.

In the story of the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the two disciples walk out of Jerusalem discussing the shattering events that they have just witnessed and wondering at the rumours that they have heard of Jesus’ resurrection. At the point when they constrain the stranger to share the blessing of a meal their eyes were opened and they encountered their risen Lord. Traditionally, the interpretation of that story has hinged around the preaching of the word and the breaking of bread, two actions that form the liturgy of worship in which Christ is rendered present. In the act of offering hospitality, however, the hosts suddenly find themselves being hosted and the act of open hospitality renders present the risen Christ and the frontiers of the kingdom extend. This vision of hospitality is deeply rooted in Hebrew culture and texts. In the story of Abraham and Sarah at the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18) we hear how Sarah is blessed with fertility in old age because of



Abraham's willingness to be hospitable to three strangers. In the story, he offers water and bread to assuage thirst and also to soothe the travellers' feet following a hard and dusty day on the road. It is a risky and brave action but he took the risk of trusting these strangers and all Israel was blessed for generations to come as a result.

In another arresting story of hospitality, Jesus stoops low and washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-15). In this action of profound humility and hospitality Jesus removes his outer robe, the mark of status in his culture, and wraps a simple towel around his waist. So often in the offer of hospitality we wish to retain the upper hand and to feel we have a superior status. We might imagine that there is nothing being asked of us other than to welcome in to our gathering the poor wretch who is out in the cold and give him a little of our surplus. Certainly, I think that a lot of us feel that offering hospitality will bring us a new member or two to add to the congregational roll. What we don't always anticipate is that we are being invited to stoop low in deep humility, to put away that which appears to guarantee our status and to be changed ourselves. What Jesus demonstrates is the cost of hospitality and the need to affirm common humanity and treat one another, perhaps especially the poor, as royalty. If there is any inequality in hospitality it is the demand for humility on the part of those who offer it. The stranger is so easily labelled and given a different status to that of those who welcome the stranger. In our prosperous culture we so often imagine we have so much to give and frequently can overlook our own spiritual poverty. Jesus invites us to see the humanity of the other, not his homelessness or his poverty or his sickness. As a friend who works with the homeless pointed out to me recently, "I feel it is very important *not* to talk of "homeless people", but of "*people who happen to be homeless*".

Our intimate, chummy gatherings for worship can so often diminish the humanity of those who do not belong or do not feel that they can come near to God because of the wretchedness of their condition. How many times do we hear outsiders tell us that they do not feel good enough, faithful enough or worthy enough to be a part of the Christian community? The story of Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman,



probably a prostitute (Luke 7: 36-50), tells of those who simply cannot see that the God whom Jesus speaks of is the one who justifies the ungodly. It is often the case also that those who have known rejection and real alienation from the path of virtue appear to understand the nature of that Divine love and acceptance better than many who never stray far. Bob and Dave occupy the same territory as that woman. The encounter between Simon and the sinful woman led to an exchange that reveals something of Simon's own pain and weakness. It is as though the act of hospitality invites us to confront feelings of rejection and spiritual poverty in ourselves that even the most devout of us experience but would rarely acknowledge. We keep the outsider at bay because he only serves to expose the zone of our own darkness.

These were the Bible stories we shared; and through the Doctor of Ministry process, a rich vein of theological reflection was exposed that has authorised and underwritten a transformation in our congregation's understanding of its mission. I am certain the challenge of the outsider is one experienced in some way by every congregation in Scotland today. And yet, in our changed culture and threatened church we are on the defensive. It is very easy to be generating a thousand programmes that we imagine will make us more approachable and hospitable. All the while we are not always quite ready to be changed by our encounters with outsiders, to lose the protection of our outer garment. Maybe we feel that we have lost enough and we do not want to lose any more of our institution and the safe environment it provides. What would our church and our community look like if we genuinely put the poor and the outcast and the marginal people at the centre of our focus? It is easy to give from our surplus, to welcome the stranger on our terms, trusting that our generosity might benefit those whom we host. It is another thing entirely to put off our robe and wrap a towel around our waist and wash another's feet. Hospitality involves taking the risk of sacrificing our own status and becoming genuinely humble and vulnerable to those we seek to serve, be they a homeless person, an asylum seeker or volatile drug abuser. That is the strange and difficult work of hospitality that Christ invites us to share in and it is freighted with promise and blessing.

I am grateful to my congregation for those modest ways in which we glimpsed something of that journey together and found that the experience re-defined and authorised a more hospitable ministry. I feel, as a result, it reinvigorated and refreshed our shared vision about the challenges and opportunities for ministry in our context. And so I will always be thankful the many strangers whom I continue to encounter that turn out truly to be angels, helping to reconfigure my limited grasp of the meaning of God's justification of the ungodly. That notion is the only theological principle that authorises me to stand in a pulpit and preach, administer the sacraments and minister in the name of Christ.

Recommended further reading:

- Ford, David. F. *The Shape of Living*. London: Fount HarperCollins, 1997
- Green, Robin. *Only Connect: Worship and Liturgy from the Perspective of Pastoral Care*. London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1987
- Hopewell, James. F. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987
- Jones, W. Paul "Hospitality Within and Without: the Conversion to Hospitality" in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual life*, Volume IX no.1. (January/ February 1994)
- Keifert, Patrick. *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992
- Koenig, John. *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985
- Nouwen, Henri J. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1975

¹ T.S.Eliot, The Four Quartets; Little Gidding, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p222.