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**Entertaining Angels: The Mark of Hospitality** (Matthew 25. 31, 34-40)

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Four years ago, when the sense of call for Benedictus had begun to take shape for me and Neil, we found it very important to listen for what this community was called to be – to seek to discern what ways of being would characterise our life together.

Throughout Christian history, different communities have focused on particular core marks or values which shape their practice, help them discern their priorities and their direction. For example, in Benedictine monastic communities the Rule of Life is based on three core vows of stability, obedience and conversion of life. Franciscan communities orient themselves around the marks of poverty, humility and joy, and a more recent lay community I know of in England has discerned ‘availability’ and ‘vulnerability’ as being at the heart of its vocation.

Clearly these values aren’t mutually exclusive, but articulating the core gift and call of a community can help to focus its ministry, practice and common life. That’s certainly been my experience of the five marks of Benedictus – hospitality, silence, discernment, reconciliation and adventure. These have shaped our life together from the beginning, and over these next five weeks, I want to share with you something of my sense of them and invite your reflection and engagement with them. We’ll explore how they emerge from our life with God, and how they inform what is and might yet come to life among us as we seek to be a blessing for the world. Today – we’re exploring our first mark – hospitality.

The longer I dwell with the notion of hospitality, the deeper and more mysterious it becomes. The word itself comes from the Latin, *hospes*, which can mean guest or host or stranger. What seems striking is that the *same* word signifies both parties in an exchange of hospitality – guest and host, and also signals that the presence of ‘otherness’ or ‘strangeness’ is intrinsic to this encounter.

Henri Nouwen says that the practice of hospitality is about offering ‘an open ... space where strangers cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings’.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, this fellowship is not about the other becoming the same. Hospitality doesn’t assimilate the other to myself, doesn’t ‘invade’ or colonise them, but rather makes room for the other, lets them be, welcomes and yields ‘space for the other’s freedom and difference’. Hospitality, says theologian Thomas Reynolds, ‘opens copiously to host the other’.<sup>2</sup>

This non-coercive space of hospitality is conceived in our tradition to be constitutive of God’s very being. God is not an isolated monad, but a living communion of persons in relation, a Trinitarian dance of intimacy and otherness. And as God is, so God does. When you think about it, creation itself is an act of hospitality. God desires that what is not God should exist; God makes room for otherness and the possibility of free relationship. Throughout the history of Israel and the church, God is depicted as seeking friendship with human beings, but only ever in terms of call and response, the invitation to communion. Jesus images the reign of God, time and again, as a great banquet to which all are invited as guests. And through his own practice of what Rowan Williams has called ‘anarchic hospitality’, Jesus enacts this invitation in the world. To imitate Christ means that our vocation too, Nouwen writes, is ‘to convert the ...

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), p.63.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), p.241.

[stranger] into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet here we come to a kind of paradox, or at least a tension in the notion of hospitality. Because although it involves making room for the other, letting the other be, this is not the same as vacating the space altogether. To offer hospitality, we must show up, we must be present. Nouwen makes the point that you don't offer someone hospitality by letting them into your house, and then just leaving them to it! Hospitality is necessarily relational, which means it's not quite the same as just 'live and let live'. It's a much more active commitment to be with and to be myself in relation to the other, where each of us is vulnerable to being affected by, transformed by the encounter.

Sometimes this may involve a difficult struggle to know how to be true to myself and my own needs, while offering radical welcome and the space for fellowship. Reynolds has written of his personal struggle to offer authentic hospitality to his disabled son. 'It has been my deepest wish', he says, 'to make room for Chris, to make time for him, to share life with him on his terms, not mine. But this has not been easy, for the daily challenges have tempted me to close the doors of my heart and shut down'.<sup>4</sup> At other times a commitment to hospitality might involve the difficult journey of forgiveness, or the willingness to respond spaciously in the face of threat or fear, annoyance or disagreement. For God, the cost of offering hospitality to us is crucifixion. Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity marvellously expresses this reality. The space God creates for us at the table, the meal to which we are invited, is comprised of the body and blood of Christ, given over to create guests of us, as he seeks to liberate us from estrangement and our fear of being loved.

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<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p.63.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.248.

So hospitality can be risky, sometimes painful and often confronting. Yet without risking it, we will never experience the possibility of true communion, which is unity-in-difference, intimacy and otherness. It's hospitality that creates the space-between which is both free and vulnerably open to relationship, and this is a stance we can bring to every part of our lives. We can offer hospitality to ourselves, especially those bits of us we find strange or unwelcome! We can practice hospitality to others – letting them be, hearing their stories, and risking the vulnerability of a live encounter – here at Benedictus, in our families, our workplaces, and with that annoying person in the supermarket queue. In doing so, and this is the deep mystery of hospitality, we may discover that we are offering hospitality to God.

There's a long tradition in Scripture that in offering hospitality to strangers, you might be entertaining angels unawares (Heb. 13.2). Rublev's icon draws on just this theme in the story of Abraham who entertained three visitors who turned out to be 'the Lord'; in our reading, Jesus insists that those who have offered hospitality to 'the least of these', 'did it to me' (Matt. 25. 40). And quoting this same passage from Matthew's gospel, the Rule of St Benedict instructs that guests are to be welcomed to the monastery 'as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me'.

Now we could relate to this tradition as an exercise in prudence: you'd better be nice because the frog might turn out to be a prince, the company director could be on the factory floor. But the deeper wisdom expressed here is that when we are truly, wholly present to one another, when we create space within us and around us really to receive and welcome one another, then we *will* recognise in them the presence of the divine life – the life of God animating every person. Our practice of hospitality will have led us into holy communion – with ourselves, our brothers and sisters, and with God.

So as we prepare ourselves now to receive again the gift of God's hospitality to us, let us pray that we will learn together in ever-deepening ways how we as a

community, and how we as individuals, might live into this mark of hospitality so that we may indeed be a community of blessing for our world.