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Entertaining Angels: Practising the Mark of Hospitality (Matthew 25.31, 34-40)

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All Christian communities are supposed to reflect and imitate the way of Christ. It would be hard to imagine a form of Christian life that didn't recognize compassion, generosity, self-giving as intrinsic to discipleship – even if the way these are practised, the maturity of their expression, may vary enormously. At the same time, throughout Christian history, particular communities have been called to reflect this basic orientation in distinctive ways. Communities are given particular charisms or gifts, particular values that shape their practice, help them discern their priorities and direction. In Benedictine monastic communities, for example, 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, while a more recently formed new monastic community in Northumbria has discerned 'availability' and 'vulnerability' as being at the heart of its vocation.

Benedictus too has core commitments or marks. If you're a newer member, you might have noticed five words running across the bottom of our website: hospitality, silence, discernment, reconciliation and adventure. Almost exactly five years ago, I preached a series of reflections focusing on these five marks of Benedictus – seeking to draw out their meaning and my sense of their significance for our life. Since then, Benedictus has grown significantly – numerically and geographically. Many of you have perhaps not had an opportunity to reflect on these marks and what they call us to. And even for those of us who've been around for a while, it's always fruitful to revisit our core charisms, to let our understanding of them deepen and evolve. 'To return to the beginning', paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, and 'know it for the first time' – or at least, in a fuller way.

So over these next few weeks, as we establish what is effectively a new season in our common life, I thought it might be helpful for us to reflect again on our

five marks. In particular, to focus on what it means for us to seek to practise them at this time in the life of our community and the life of the world. My hope is that this exploration will help strengthen the bonds between us – deepen our sense of ourselves *as* a community; and that it will tune our attention and responsiveness for what the Spirit is doing within, among and through us. Today we’re exploring the first mark of Benedictus – hospitality.

When I reflected on this theme five years ago, I said that that longer I dwell with the notion of hospitality, the 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 – guest and host – in an exchange of hospitality. There’s a reciprocity – a mutuality involved. It also signals that the presence of ‘otherness’ or ‘strangeness’ is intrinsic. Henri Nouwen says that hospitality is about offering ‘an open ... space where strangers cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings’.¹ Importantly, this fellowship is not about all of us becoming the same. Hospitality doesn’t assimilate the otherness of the other, 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’.²

This non-coercive space of hospitality is conceived in our tradition to be the very nature of God. God is not an isolated monad, a sameness, but a 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 be; God makes room for otherness and the possibility of free, reciprocal 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. To imitate Christ means

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

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

that our vocation too, Nouwen writes, is 'to convert the ... [stranger] into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced'.³

So there is a necessarily non-coercive dimension to hospitality. Importantly, however, although it involves making room for the other, letting the other be, this is not the same as vacating the space altogether. Because 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 – for us as individuals and as a community – a difficult struggle to know how to be true to myself and my own needs and commitments, while offering radical welcome, liberating the other to be. Thomas 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'.⁴ In other situations, a commitment to hospitality might involve the difficult journey of forgiveness, or the willingness to respond spaciouly in the face of threat or fear, annoyance or profound disagreement. And this means that hospitality can be a risky business, sometimes painful and often confronting.

For Jesus, the cost of offering God's non-coercive hospitality to us was crucifixion. Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity powerfully expresses this truth. 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

³ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p.63.

⁴ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.248.

liberate us from estrangement and our fear of being loved. And this points to the deep truth that without accepting the risk of offering and receiving hospitality, we never experience true communion. It's hospitality that creates that space-between which is both free and being-in-relation. 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 do this whenever we become aware of our impulse to shut out, to resist aspects of ourselves, and then intentionally and inwardly open the door – release that reaction, create space around what we experience as shameful, inadequate, wrong in us. We can practice hospitality to criticism or correction or new ideas – those things we also instinctively resist or shut out. This doesn't mean uncritically taking on whatever people happen to throw at us, but it does mean a willingness to entertain what might at first be unwelcome feedback or news – letting it be, letting it in long enough to listen for what may be its gift. And we can practise hospitality towards others, particularly those we find difficult, those whose views or behaviour seem dangerous or abhorrent, those we do not understand or whose suffering and need we find discomfiting, threatening. We can make space for the fullness of this other, risking the vulnerability of a live encounter. 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 (the stranger within, the stranger without) we might be entertaining angels unawares (Heb. 13.2). That's what happened for Abraham who welcomed three visitors into his tent at Mamre who turned out to be 'the Lord'; in tonight's 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, 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'. The wisdom of this tradition is that when we are truly, wholly present to ourselves and one another, when we create space within

and around us really to receive and welcome one another, then we will encounter the divine life – the life of God animating every person. Our practice of hospitality, sometimes costly and hardwon, will have led us into holy communion – with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters, and with God.

We live in a world where it feels increasingly counter-cultural to practice this radical hospitality. There's a violence in the air, an impatience with difference and disagreement. Even for communities that purportedly value and practice hospitality, who desire to make everyone welcome, we find ourselves living and gathering more and more in enclaves of the like-minded, not ever really encountering the other. Here at Benedictus, for example, I'm very conscious that we're mostly educated, middle-class, white, progressive. Who would we find it difficult to welcome? Are there forms of inhospitality that I or we are practising, without even knowing it?

A commitment to practise authentic hospitality enacts a Christ-like faith that when otherness, estrangement, even hostility, is met by spaciousness, welcome, respect – something more, something else becomes possible for us all. The question I am holding is what our deepening engagement with this mark of Benedictus is calling us to, in these days – in the circumstances of our own lives, and in the life of our world. And I would love it, if you would hold this question with me!