



9 October 2011
Trinity XVI
Choral Evensong
Genesis 18 vv. 1–15
Mark 7 vv. 24–30

A Civilising Hospitality

or

‘crumbs for the dogs’

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I want to start this evening with a bit of a ‘compare and contrast’ approach to our two readings to draw out a distinction between what might be described as unconditional and conditional hospitality.

It is of course our Old Testament reading that provides us with a clear example of unconditional hospitality, that of the familiar tale of the hospitality of Abraham (Genesis 18: 1-15) It is a story of complete, open-handed, ungrudging generosity. In the very heat of the day, the most inhospitable time, Abraham, alert to the possibility of visitors and despite his age runs to the strangers, ensures that they are made comfortable and that everything possible could be done.

It could, of course, have been a very different, very ugly and tragic tale: Unaware of ‘stranger danger’ the naive and vulnerable and aged and prosperous Abraham could have been rendering himself a victim through his unguarded approach: host could have become hostage; guest revealed as thief or robber of murderer. The hospitality of Abraham is clearly a moral tale of mythic quality, for as it turns out the visitors are of divine origin and Abraham's actions generate divine blessing which in turn generates new life; with the dry and barren desert of Sarah and Abraham's old age being transformed by the unexpected arrival of Isaac.

Unconditional hospitality reveals itself then as the foundation for a civilization; as bearing within itself the seeds of promise and hope and human flourishing. Abraham can indeed become the Father of many nations; Sarah the spiritual mother of innumerable children. This is then a moral story which strongly commends the practice of hospitality as foundational to social and religious life.

But this cannot simply be read as a foundational story for Abraham's actions must also be seen in the context of a traditional culture with a strong and well-established set of practices about hospitality. The account of Abraham is in this sense also an exemplary one; he demonstrates ‘best practice’ in desert hospitality.

Our New Testament reading provides an interesting contrast: Where Abraham's visitors find a warm invitation and the door wide open; the Syro-Phoenician woman has to do all the running and beg; whereas the three men might have posed a threat, the woman, whose need is great clearly does not; where Abraham models unconditional hospitality; the response to the woman is decidedly conditional: insiders, home team come a very strong first; those outside the magic circle of Judaism may receive a few crumbs...if they are lucky. The woman as a Gentile, stands outside the privileged sphere, she doesn't meet the conditions, she is excluded from the chosen people by her ethnicity and religious identity. Yet, having retreated to Tyre and Sidon, to what might be described as the borderlands of Israel proper, Jesus for the first time in Mark's gospel grants healing at the request of a Gentile and cures her daughter, and at the end of the encounter the woman does indeed receive what she asks for.



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The conditioning of hospitality is not in itself an evil. Indeed it is incredibly difficult to imagine complex societies and institutions being able to operate without lines and boundaries and distinctions; without understandings of what constitute membership or status and the criteria that underpins this. The University of Cambridge, St John's College, the Nation-State, all of these inevitably operate within boundaries that are exclusive: Not everyone who wants to study can receive the benefits that Cambridge has to offer; not everybody who wishes to can come to the UK or to other relatively prosperous countries. Conditional hospitality is a good but it is a limited one, there are points where 'No's' have to be articulated and refusals made - and there is a sad inevitability about that.

A neat distinction: But there is a problem. For despite the happy outcome – something sticks in the gullet and leaves a bitter taste. For Jesus employs the popular language of the people, and the sheer ugliness of it startles us, it rightly offends us: 'dogs', 'DOGS'. We immediately recognise such a derogatory term as belonging to a vast repertoire of language (direct or euphemistic), attitudes, stereotypes and assumptions most commonly used to deny another's humanity; to distance, belittle, alienate. We know that the use of such language teeters at the top of the proverbial slippery slope and allows people to justify discrimination, bullying, violence and ultimately under certain circumstances, even murder. In healing the woman's daughter, Jesus draws attention not just to the boundary between Jew and Gentile but also to this painfully common human impulse; that in addition to denying people access to a wide range of resources – economic, political, cultural – sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad – we also seek to deny our common humanity, seek to truncate the possibilities for genuine human encounter, set out to kill the promise inherent in the hospitable.

Clearly, unlike Abraham, 'the father of many nations' (Gen 17 v. 4), we do not follow codes of hospitality designed for the desert wanderer, but the British do have a set of values that they claim as their own and proclaim as characteristic – in the popular register we might talk of a sense of fairplay or support for the 'underdog', we laud our long tradition of democracy and historians might speak of the emphasis within the British philosophical tradition on the 'social virtues' of compassion, benevolence or sympathy. All of these things are true, yet I wonder whether we might be in serious danger of neglecting this noble tradition, a point I want to illustrate by reference to one particular group of people within our society, for the yawning language gap between Syro-Phoenician woman and 'dog' is uncomfortable close to that between 'asylum seeker' and 'scrounger' or 'cheat' in much of our public discourse in the UK

Asylum-seekers, we should just remind ourselves, are people who have lodged an application for protection on the basis of the Refugee convention because they fear that they will be subject to torture, degrading treatment or execution if they stay or return to their country of origin. The most commonly applied words for such individuals within UK newspaper coverage are 'bogus' and 'fraudulent' and to the phenomenon 'en masse' – 'waves' and 'floods'. Well, last year, there were just under 18, 000 people seeking such protection from the British people, by way of comparison, five times that number of UK citizens, 107,000, left these shores to live abroad. And the countries of origin of these individuals seeking protection ought to cause at least a glimmer of doubt in some minds – the top three being - Iran, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.



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As the coalition, ‘Still human, still here’ made up of 49 charities including Amnesty International, the British Red Cross, Oxfam, the Children Society have clearly documented, the vast majority of those within the asylum system live on the edge of destitution, have poor legal representation, and frequently deal with bureaucratic processes and systems shot through with a culture of derision and a ‘default disbelief’ about their claims. Evidence presented in a number of independent reports and complaints clearly show that the subject of asylum is subjected to ‘Sustained inaccurate and inflammatory reporting’ⁱⁱ; large numbers of decisions which are taken to appeal are overturned when the evidence is presented and the restrictions on both permission to work and to receive benefits, render most destitute. Sadly politicians, doubtless with an eye to popular prejudice, are more than capable of participating in this culture of derision as the Home Secretary has demonstrated so clearly this week with her ‘and I’m not making this up..’ claim about an illegal immigrant saved from deportation by the face he owned a catⁱⁱⁱ. Sadly, this willingness to believe the worst, this cavalier approach to the facts, this negativity to migration in general is made worse by the fact that many politicians show, what can only be described as a willful ignorance about the safety of certain countries^{iv}, even when the human rights’ records of those countries are denounced in Parliament – we are, for example, still deporting many people back to Zimbabwe.

It may well be that the occasional asylum seeker is a fraudster. And indeed, I am not advocating today, nor indeed are the leading charities behind the Still Human, Still here campaign advocating anything other than a fair process which establishes the truth of people’s claims for asylum...but currently with the processes we have and the inhospitable nature of wider British culture fed by our national press, we are, at the moment, in this country, treating thousands of needy and abused people like dogs. Rather than ‘fairplay’ or standing up for the ‘underdog’, we are as a culture treading the meagre crumbs on offer into the carpet and watching people on their hands and knees desperately trying to get some sustenance?

Unconditional hospitality is clearly utopian, it is an ideal - like the stars in the sky. Yet, the stars may be impossibly far away but they can still be used to orientate; to guide; to set a course and direction^v. So too we need unconditional hospitality; we need the example of it to humanise our globlising world and its processes; we need its generosity and compassion to build bridges across the islands of cultural difference; we need its capacity to look out to the horizon and welcome the Other; we need it to loose us from our patterns of protective behaviour, from our ill-based fears and suspicions that turn us in upon ourselves. Hospitality, as the story of Abraham makes clear, gives birth to promise and human flourishing; and indeed the list of asylum seekers and refugees who have given much to our society and to others is a very long one including of course religious leaders like the Dalai Lama and the current Archbishop of York; but even more than this, with the birth of Isaac, hospitality produces the joy of laughter, for laughter, is the meaning of the child, Isaac’s name. And indeed, laughter is a frequent hallmark of profound and genuine hospitality when people discover in the midst of mis-translation and mis-understanding a connection; their common, shared humanity – it is a transformative gift shared by guest and host. There are some parts of our society where sadly there are few laughs to be had, let us pray that such places be transformed ...through a reclaiming of the virtue foundational to our civilization, that of hospitality.

ⁱ Much of the detail in this section comes from a Stillhumanstillhere document:
www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/ngos/StillHumanStillHere_UK_CERD79.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15160326

^{iv} One of a number of critical observations made by the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, the Rt Revd John Packer, at a General Synod fringe meeting July 2011.

^v See Leonardo Boff, *Virtues for Another Possible World* Cascade Books, 2011.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

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