

**Sermon 12<sup>th</sup> July 2009** (Genesis 18:1-8, Luke 19:1-9) “Hospitality”

Julia phoned the other day.

She wanted to chat. Did I have time? Was it convenient?

She had this concern for me?

She really wanted to discuss my personal need ...

...of double glazing.

“Hi, Alistair, it’s Julia here” – so personal, and yet so phoney.

I go to the bank, and Bob talks to me.

Now, before Bob took over, Mr. Smith used to be the manager.

But now it’s Bob, and he calls me Alistair.

So friendly, so personal – except it’s not.

Mr Smith worked there for 30 years, and he knew everyone.

Bob’s been there 3 months, and he’s moving branches soon.

And when I phone Bob, Phil will answer the phone –

that’s Phil, from the call centre, in India.

A modern society of phoney intimacy, masking lonely people.

Single households on the increase

And the Family, which once gathered round the piano, then switched from wireless to TV – to personalised media centre in every bedroom.

An Ipod generation, where every virtual household is differentiated only by its degree of relational dysfunctionality.

I’m getting with technology these days.

I put my profile on facebook the other week.

(If you don’t know what face book is, then ask the grandchildren when you get home.)

But you put your profile on the website, and other people ask to be your friend

In two weeks, I have 11 friends – feel really popular!

Virtual friends, and I can collect even more.

You can be my friend –

and I don’t have to drink a coffee with you.

We never have to meet – or even to speak to each other.

Well, Facebook is fun,

but call me a twee old-fashioned technophobe, but you *really* want to be my friend, can we do it the old way occasionally?

Coffee – lunch – a conversation? That’d be nice.

We live in the world with too many virtual friends.

Where even so many we count as friends are really just relationships with ships passing in the night.

We place our name on a website ironically called "friends reunited" in the vain hope that we can pass meaningless superficial notes to an old schoolmates who we couldn't stand back then anyway.

Lonely people surround us

From the elderly woman, unable to get out so much, and whose friendships are memories if the departed,

to the child isolated from the playground's "in group";

the worker in his Dilbert cubicle ,

with colleagues whose lives he knows nothing of.

Anonymous people with irrelevant names serve us in our no-longer local shops.

This is the lonely age.

So today, perhaps Zacchaeus of Jericho could be our patron saint  
He might be an icon for our time.

Because Zacchaeus is the lonely man:

lost in a crowd;

as friendless as Fred Godwin.

For Zacchaeus, other people have become economic opportunities to exploit, or  
obstacles in his way, to be overcome.

So Zacchaeus sits in the splendid isolation of his tree  
trying, like so many, to get his religious experience – alone.

And Jesus reaches him

looks up, and says

not “repent” - not “believe” - not “follow me”

not “sell your belongings”

But “put the kettle on, Zacchaeus”

“Zacchaeus, practice hospitality”

And Zacchaeus becomes a host

and as he does so, he no longer sees people as a financial opportunity

rather he sees the poor and wants to give,

he recognises the exploited, and wants to compensate.

He’s seeing people as people again.

And Jesus says “this is salvation, now he too is a son of Abraham”

he’s come out of the tree and he’s back in the family

walking with his community once again.

What’s the message?

If you would save a man’s soul – the first step...

is lunch.

And as the TV is turned off and the headphones removed,  
as we climb down from the trees and begin to talk to each other,  
there is God to be found.

People, we are in the relationship business!

For it is **not** a programme that will save the world

it is **not** an alpha course that will win the nations

it is **not** even an innovative, well-run, brilliantly-staffed church

it’s people:

people offering authentic relationship to people, in Christ’s name.

It is that simple.

A Reachout worker in a school,

is the human face of the Church

Christians in the community

Believers in the workplace, on the football field, in the coffee shop

offering real friendship and genuine relationship

and saying this is what the kingdom of God looks like.

And if you want a biblical basis, read:

Romans 12:13 “practice hospitality”

1 Peter 4:9 “offer hospitality”

3 John 1:8 “show hospitality”

Now, when three apostles agree, almost word for word:  
don't you think it is time to sit up and listen?

In fact, the Bible has almost as much to say about hospitality as it has to say about sex.

We are to do it generously, freely, constantly and even with strangers.

(That's the hospitality not the sex!)

When Scripture commands “practice hospitality” it is just as serious as when it says “avoid fornication”

When will the Church get with God's priorities?

Indeed, if people had the genuine intimacy of relational hospitality – they might be less attracted to hollow and meaningless sexual encounters.

Now a confession.

I preached on this theme of Zacchaeus and hospitality three weeks ago on a Sunday evening, at the Reachout Service, just before I went off on holiday.

I don't know about you, but when I go off on holiday it takes me several days to switch off from work.

So there we were driving off to start our holiday  
and I've got Zacchaeus and hospitality on my brain

The first day of holiday, we drove up to Fort William

And as we drove through Glencoe, I'm telling my daughter the story of the Glencoe Massacre,

and I'm thinking how little sense that story makes unless we understand a highland culture of hospitality.

Why did MacDonald of Glencoe take the Campbell soldiers into his home?

And then we drove up the Great Glen to Inverness – and to Culloden.

And I'm thinking how was it that after his defeat there Bonnie Prince Charlie was able to avoid capture for five months:

no clan, protestant nor catholic would refuse him food, or betray him to the government.

A culture of hospitality.

A culture of hospitality that doesn't just mean that it's nice to invite friends for a meal because it is good to be sociable, and we want to try out the latest Nigella Lawson recipe

Or that we might choose to have dinner parties because that's what we enjoy doing.

It isn't a lifestyle choice, something to do if you happen to be sociable.

But this is hospitality that **MUST** be offered to friend and enemy alike.

Because that's what we do.

An Englishman might have a castle for a home and pull the drawbridge when he chooses.

But the Christian is *commanded* to “practice hospitality”

And indeed, Scots and Jews, and Jesus, and Abraham

and all those three apostles,

would consider anyone who refused to practice hospitality to be “anti-social”

indeed “misanthropic” – to use a bigger word

To be inhospitable is to be antisocial and lacking in manners, love and self-respect.

Abraham got it.

Three men approached his camp at Mamre, they were strangers.  
He'd never met them.

Now, the reader of Genesis knows that this is the Lord God communicating with Abraham concerning the promise that Sarah will have a son.

And when God appears directly is called a Theophany.

And because the Lord speaks to Abraham through three messengers at Mamre, later Christian readers will identify this as the Holy Trinity appearing to Abraham, which starts off all sorts of arguments between Jewish and Christian commentators. But all that is beside the point.

Because Abraham has no idea who these men are and what their significance is.

They are just strangers

And he offers them exactly the same hospitality he'd have offered to any other passing traveller

"let me get you a little water and a little bread"

And then he runs to Sarah and tells her

"Kill a calf" – literally a bull

"Bake a cake" (and here is enough flour used to bake dozens of cakes)

And the water is curds and milk

There's no Edinburgh-style "you'll have had your tea" here!

This is generous and spontaneous hospitality, Glasgow style.

Why does Abraham do this for the travellers?

Because that's what you do.

Not because he thinks they are gods, but because that's what God's people do for all people:

for friends and strangers,

for Campbells and MacDonalds

for Princes and Redcoats

for beggars and wanderers.

Not because they "feel sociable and want dinner guests"

But because this is what it means to be godly.

It is that our homes become an extension of God's house

and our tables become an extension of God's table.

And that the welcome we give to friends and strangers at the door of this church – it is to be the same welcome given in any of the 100 or more homes represented here.

And it is to reflect our expectation and experience of God's welcome of us in his own presence home and table.

The writer of Hebrews gets it when, thinking of Abraham at Mamre, he says:

*Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup>Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:1-2*

And when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man dividing the sheep and the goats, he says to the sheep

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me"

and the goats did not.

The sheep are unaware of this "lord, when were you a stranger and we welcome you?"  
And he replies what you did (unawares) for the least, you did that for me.

God is to be found in fellowship  
As hearts and hearths and pantries are opened  
As we let people into our lives  
As we serve them at tables  
So God is found.

The message is not simply "it is nice to be hospitable" no!  
What we are saying is that hospitality shows us something of the divine nature.

God is into hospitality.

He brings bread and wine "without money or price"  
manna in the desert, loaves and fish by Galilee  
bread and wine in an upper room.

Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding  
feast for his son, and sent out invitations"

*My table thou hath furnished,  
In presence of my foes  
my head though does with oil anoint  
and my cup overflows.*

Because my God is indeed the heavenly host

Father Son and Holy Spirit exist in real intimacy  
God is love - he exists in deep relationship - in deep fellowship.  
And the good news of the Gospel is that God invites us into that relationship with him  
and through him with each other.

It is not just that Zacchaeus is a bad man who gets called down from a tree that he  
might repent, his sins might be forgiven, his ethics reformed, and then he can go back  
up his tree as a "saved man" (justified by faith).

But the salvation that Jesus offers here is where Jesus "comes to this house"  
When Zacchaeus enters into fellowship with the Son of God, with through him with  
God the Father, and with the disciples and then with the community that he's been  
alienated from.

That's what Jesus means when he says  
"Today salvation has come to this house,  
because he too is a son of Abraham.  
For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

God invites us no longer to be "lonely men" like Zacchaeus  
- but to enter into that mystery of intimacy with him and with each other

That's what Abraham did at Mamre  
That's what Zacchaeus did in Jericho  
And that's what we are invited to do continually

It is no accident that the central act of the Church's worship is ... What?  
Not a retreat into spiritual silence or contemplation  
Not a prayer meeting  
Not a Bible Study

But it is a meal -where we come and eat with God.  
And eat together

And in the early Church  
They broke bread together in homes  
Spiritually - God was the host - inviting them to eat - just as he invited Zacchaeus  
But practically, that worked itself out in believers entering the home life and serving  
each other  
And that is the God who invites us  
and tells us to be those who invite others.

Are you a Christian?  
Then practice hospitality

Because, in fact, it isn't just about opening up our churches and offering coffees, it is  
about reaching out in real relationship.  
Saying "We want to know you! – yes really know you!"

Jesus doesn't offer Zacchaeus a coffee, or a pizza  
rather, he commands **Zaccheus** himself to "practice hospitality"  
and Zacchaeus opens first his home and then his hands and then his life.

There are actually only 4 times in the gospels that Jesus feeds people himself.  
(Now, granted, on one of these occasions, he caters for 5,000, so let's not be too hard  
on the guy)

But, being a New Testament scholar I've done some expensive research and  
calculated, based on two meals a day, that Jesus ate roughly 24,090 meals -  
which means that 24,086 times, Jesus invited someone else to "practice hospitality"  
and feed him,  
(probably most of it his mother).

And so the calling.

Pharisees, tax-gatherers, and mothers-in-laws  
in Jerusalem, in Galilee, at a house in Emmaus  
at dining table, in Pizza Hut, and in school canteen  
to offer real relationships  
to practice hospitality  
that loneliness might end, and Jesus be found

The vision is not to sit in our Church house and play host  
the vision is to go out – to "reach out"

to playground  
to office  
to school  
to park  
to community  
and to create real relationships  
between youth and elderly  
Baptist and Presbyterian  
Christian and Agnostic

Because we believe in a God  
who is found in the breaking of bread  
and not in the climbing of trees.

Amen

## **Prayer of intercession**

Lord,  
Father, Son and Holy spirit,  
we come to you aware of our broken relationships.

We call you Abba, Father  
and yet we keep our distance  
we keep you at arms length  
we keep our worship often so formal, so impersonal.

We hear your invitation to come  
We see that picture of the Father's arms outstretched to embrace us you prodigal sons.  
Yet we stand off.

We come aware of our broken relationships.  
The people we've hurt.  
The people who have hurt us.  
The people who long to embrace us, that we push away.  
The people we long to embrace – but we don't open our arms.  
The time we fail to offer to each other – in church, in family, among friends.

Lord have mercy and graciously heal us.

Lift us that we might enter into the mystery of a relationship with you  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
And in prayer, in worship, and in silence  
we might sit with you.  
Knowing our Father  
through the blood of your Son  
bound by the Holy Spirit that proceeds from him.  
That we might share in that unity of love for ever.

And we pray for the healing of relationships.  
For reconciliation in families, in community and in our whole world.  
The reconciliation in Jesus Christ, who makes all things new.

Let us practice hospitality:  
that our homes might reflect your welcome  
and that the doors of this church might invite people to enter into you.

Lord teach us to love.

We pray to the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit  
one God, in love evermore

Amen.