

# Church as guest



A question that seems to arise in many conversations I have about mission is ‘what kind of church do we want to be?’ As always, ecclesiology (the study of the church) is never far from missiology (the study of mission).

The answer to ‘what kind of church do you want to be?’ is invariably about hospitality. Answers like, ‘we want to be welcoming’, ‘we want to be relevant’, ‘we want to be inclusive’ are all valid answers to the question – and they all assume that good hospitality occurs when we (the church) are hosts.

The route word for hospitality is the same route for hostage. *Hospes* originally meant stranger, guest and to offer hospitality was to be 'Lord of the Stranger' and to take a hostage 'was a lodger held by a landlord for security'. To be hospitable is to have power.

This *guest/host* relationship is complex and the possibility of hospitality is full of contradiction as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has pointed out. Derrida reminds us that ultimate or *pure* hospitality is impossible

Unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer, the guest to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If however, there is pure hospitality, it should be pushed to this extreme.<sup>i</sup>

This is why we never mean it when we say, ‘make yourself at home?’ we don't actually want the people we say that to, to make our home theirs (where we shall be the guest).

But when we read Luke 10, we see another way of thinking about mission. Jesus instructs the 70/72 to knock on a door and say, ‘peace be with you’ if their peace is returned then they stay in that house eating what they are given, receiving hospitality, until the work is done. In this instance, the Jesus whose ministry is punctuated with him being guest, is challenging his followers to do the same.

A guest and a host are not direct opposites. You cannot identify the characteristics of one and recognize the other in its inverted form; but neither can you separate host from guest. One only exists in the presence of the other.

To be a good host is to create space for welcome. To hold open the space enough that strangers and friends alike are afforded a dignity and respect that is inherent in their creatureliness. To be a host is to reshape the social order so that the last become first; those unwelcome are now welcome. To be host you must have a space that you command and the ability to change the environment to suit your guests that they might eventually feel that they belong and join the host in their hosting.

To be a good guest is to find yourself in the company of others (often strangers); to relinquish control of the conversation; to bring gifts to the party; to travel light; to practice the art of vulnerability; to be drawn to public spaces; to be willing to wander.

‘Perhaps it is the art of being guest that Christians in the West most need to recapture [...] if we are to experience holiness in encounter with those who are different from us and participate in the kind of community to which God is calling the whole of humanity.’<sup>ii</sup>

What would happen, I wonder, if the church were to see itself as guest rather than host? Where might we find ourselves? Whose company would we be in? and how would we respond in places where we don’t have ‘mastery’? or to put it another way, what if the answer to the question ‘what kind of church do we want to be?’ is simply ‘to be a good guest.’

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- <sup>i</sup> Kearney ,R and Dooley, M (1999) *Questioning ethics: contemporary debates in philosophy* London: Routledge (chapter on Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: a dialogue with Jaques Derrida) p71
- <sup>ii</sup> Leach, J (2007) *Walking the Story: In the Steps of Saints and Pilgrims* Inspire.