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CATHY ROSS

Creating Space: Hospitality as a Metaphor for Mission

Beginning with the biblical witness, Cathy Ross explores the character of hospitality and shows how it can function as a powerful metaphor for mission. Using this metaphor we are encouraged and enabled to reflect on the importance of shared meals and being at the margins, the need to see and respect the guest and stranger as other, and above all the value of understanding both hospitality and mission in terms of creating welcoming space just as God has welcomed and made space for us.

Hospitality is more than coffee and cake, although this may be a good place to start. Hospitality is indeed a rich concept, full of potential and part of a rich biblical and Christian tradition echoing through the ages. Most of the ancient world regarded hospitality as a fundamental virtue and practice, as do many cultures still in our world today. In the West, we have tended to water it down or commercialise it into an industry with training courses, certificates, five star ratings and ‘meet and greet’ attitudes. It has also become a contested idea as we face fear of the stranger and ambivalence towards engaging with the other.

In what follows, we will reflect on how hospitality is an excellent metaphor for mission as it begins with God and is an essentially outward-looking practice and virtue. We will consider the biblical concept of hospitality and the roles of host and of guest or stranger. We see this clearly in the Old Testament and in the ministry of Jesus where he enjoys feasting with all the wrong people. This culminates in the Last Supper, where we as guests rejoice in the presence of the Host. The practice of hospitality enables to see the other and therefore to establish a relationship which has profound consequences for how we live together in the world. Generous hospitality can lead to reconciliation and genuine embrace of the other. Finally the practice of hospitality allows for creating space – space that allows room for both host and guest or stranger.

Hospitality as welcome of guest and stranger

Old Testament Israel

Israel experienced God as a God of hospitality. Stories of hospitality are foundational to Israel’s very existence and identity. These stories contain themes and tensions which resonate through the centuries – stories of hospitality received and hospitality abused.

The well-known story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers (in Gen. 18) brought them both good news and bad news in the context of their hospitality. The guests confirmed they would have a son in their old age but they also warned Abraham of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Pohl remarks, in her superb book on hospitality, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, ‘The first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers.’¹ However, the subsequent story is more ambiguous and although Lot is later commended for being a ‘righteous man’, his offer of his virgin daughters, rather than his guests, whom he doubtless felt obliged to protect, is still shocking and highlights the potential costs, dangers and ambiguities of hospitality.

Hospitality was considered an important duty and often we see the hosts becoming beneficiaries of their guests and strangers. So Abraham and Sarah entertained angels in Gen. 18, Rahab and her family were saved from death by welcoming Joshua’s spies (Joshua 2) and the widow of Zarephath benefited from Elijah’s visit (1 Kings 17). Ultimately, Israel’s obligation to care for the stranger is because of her experience as a stranger and alien. God instructs them to care for the alien and stranger as they themselves were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exod. 22:21, Lev. 19:34, Deut. 10:19). Just as God created them as a nation, delivered them from slavery in Egypt and fed them in the wilderness, so their hospitality in turn serves as a reminder of and witness to God’s hospitality towards them. And always they have the stories in their tradition that guests and strangers might be angels, bringing divine promises and provision.

Jesus’ ministry

Jesus takes this even further in the two great texts of Luke 14 and Matt. 25 where he distinguishes between conventional and Christian hospitality. In Luke 14 (vv12-14) Jesus says,

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite you friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.

This is, of course, the prelude to the parable of the Great Banquet, a powerful metaphor for the Kingdom of God, where all are universally welcomed. When the expected guests turn down the invitation to the banquet, the same four groups are to be invited – ‘the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind’ – and then everyone else from the highways and byways.

The theme of banqueting, of food and drink, is central in the ministry of Jesus. Was he not accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and of eating with sinners (Matt. 11.19)? Jesus was celebrating the messianic banquet but with all the wrong people! Bretherton even goes so far as to state that ‘this table fellowship with sinners, and the reconfiguring of Israel’s purity boundaries which this hospitality represents signifies the heart of Jesus’ mission.’² Jesus and his followers here are also celebrating the abundance of God – think of all the stories of food and drink overflowing, of parties enjoyed, of the feeding of the 5,000. God’s household is a

1 Pohl 1999: 24.

2 Bretherton 2006: 128.

household of superabundance, of extravagant hospitality, where food and wine is generously shared and the divine welcome universally offered.

Meals and mission

Shared meals are therefore central to hospitality and to mission. Michele Hershberger claims that when we eat together we are 'playing out the drama of life'³ as we begin to share stories, let down our guard and welcome strangers. Alongside the sharing of food is the sharing of stories. Rev Rebecca Nyegenye, chaplain at Uganda Christian University, told me that in Uganda hospitality goes with both elaborate meals and listening to the visitor. Ugandans believe that for any relationship to be strong, food and intentional listening must be shared. Listening is an important part of honouring the guest – in both hospitality and mission, listening to the other is the beginning of understanding and of entering the other's world.

Eating together also has a justice dimension as it is a great leveller. It is something that we all must do and so it has a profoundly egalitarian dimension. Jean Vanier, of l'Arche community, confessed that when he started to share meals with men of serious mental disabilities, 'sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a family. It was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside.'⁴ When we eat together, as we let down our guard and share stories, we begin to create relationship and this is at the heart of mission – our relationship with God and neighbour.

This is perhaps most powerfully expressed in the Eucharist, where this ritualised eating and drinking together re-enacts the crux of the gospel. As we remember what it cost Jesus to welcome us into relationship with God, we remember with sorrow the agony and the pain, but at the same time we rejoice and celebrate our reconciliation and this new relationship made possible because of Christ's sacrifice and supreme act of hospitality. We rejoice in our new relationship with God, made possible through the Cross, and we rejoice as we partake of this meal together in community. When we share in the Eucharist, we are not only foreshadowing the great heavenly banquet to come, but we are also nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table. Jesus is, quite literally, the Host as we partake of His body and blood and we are the guests as we feed on him by faith with thanksgiving. In this way, the Eucharist connects hospitality at a very basic level with God and with the *missio Dei* as it anticipates and reveals God's heavenly table and the coming Kingdom.⁵ This is beautifully expressed in one of the Eucharistic prayers:

Most merciful Lord,
Your love compels us to come in.
Our hands were unclean
Our hearts were unprepared; we were not fit
Even to eat the crumbs from under your table.
But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation,
and share your bread with sinners.
So cleanse and feed us

3 Hershberger 1999: 104.

4 Pohl 1999: 74.

5 See Hershberger, *A Christian View*, 228-9 for further discussion on this.

With the precious body and blood of your Son,
That He may live in us and we in Him;
And that we, with the whole company of Christ,
May sit and eat in your kingdom.⁶

Stranger and friend

Vanier claims that as we eat together we become friends – no longer guest nor stranger. Indeed, we were all strangers until God welcomed us into his household by grace – the supreme act of God’s hospitality (cf. Eph. 2). We have already seen that the people of Israel were strangers and aliens until they became God’s people. In fact, we need the stranger – partly because we never know whom we may be welcoming and partly because they may show us new dimensions and new aspects of God that we have never seen before. Strangers save us from cosy, domesticated hospitality and force us out of our comfort zones. Strangers may transform us and challenge us. ‘Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes.’⁷

There is an interesting and intriguing conundrum around the Greek word *xenos* which denotes simultaneously guest, host or stranger. And the Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament, *philoxenia*, refers not so much to love of strangers but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship and in the surprises that may occur. Jesus is portrayed as a gracious host, welcoming children, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners into his presence and therefore offending those who would prefer such guests not to be at his gatherings. But Jesus is also portrayed as vulnerable guest and needy stranger who came to his own but his own did not receive him. (John 1:11). Pohl comments that this ‘intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians.’⁸ Think of Jesus on the Emmaus Road as travelling pilgrim and stranger, then recognised as host and who he was in the breaking of bread during a meal involving an act of hospitality. Or think of the Peter and Cornelius story (interestingly, another story involving varieties of food) – who is the host and who is the guest? Both offer and receive, both listen and learn, both are challenged and changed by the hospitality of the other. So we can see the importance of not only the ambiguity but also the fluidity of these roles in mission. We offer and receive as both guest or stranger and as host. Amos Yong, a Malaysian professor of theology offers this insight, in a fascinating paper on the spirit of hospitality in inter-religious encounters,

Christian mission... is dependent both on the spiritual and material welcoming offered by the missionized and on the ability of missionaries to be recipients of the hospitality of others. This reciprocity and mutuality is especially vital for Christian mission in a post 9/11 world of many faiths.⁹

Hospitality as seeing the other

The biblical call

The concept of sight and recognition of the other brings us to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matt. 25 when the righteous say to Jesus, ‘Lord when did

6 Church of New Zealand 1989: 425.

7 Koenig 1985: 6

8 Pohl 1999: 17.

9 Yong 2007: 64.

we *see* you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we *see* you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we *see* you sick or in prison and go and visit you?' (Matt. 25:37-9). And we all know Jesus' answer!

Hospitality can have a subversive dimension. When we do what Jesus commended in Matt. 25 – visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, entertain the stranger – we are living out a very different set of values and relationships. We are according dignity to others, we are breaking social boundaries, we are including those who are so often excluded: we are engaged in transformation.

This transforming hospitality begins with seeing the other person with the act of recognition – a powerful act indeed. It requires looking the other in the eye – the establishment of the 'I-Thou' relationship is a fundamental act of hospitality because it acknowledges people's humanity, accords them dignity and denies their invisibility. As Pohl says,

Hospitality resists boundaries that endanger persons by denying their humanness. It saves others from the invisibility that comes from social abandonment. Sometimes, by the very act of welcome, a vision for a whole society is offered, a small evidence that transformed relations are possible.¹⁰

Think of the Good Samaritan who refused to pass by or pretend that he had not *seen* the wounded man. His act of hospitality crossed ethnic boundaries, caused him personal cost and inconvenience and saved a life. When we see the other person, we see the image of God, as well as our common humanity, which establishes a fundamental dignity, respect and common bond. The parable in Matt. 25 reminds us that we can *see* Christ in every guest and stranger.

The practical consequences

If we had been able to 'see the other' might the genocide in Rwanda never have happened? If we were able to 'see the other' might the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the civil war in Northern Ireland, the ignorance and apathy concerning Sudan and Congo, *apartheid* in South Africa, violence and oppression in Burma and Zimbabwe, tribalism, caste and class systems, oppressive colonialism – might all this have been avoided – if only we could see?

We always need to ask ourselves, "Who are we blind to in our contexts, what prevents us from seeing the other person and, wittingly or unwittingly, means that we practise a theology of exclusion rather than of embrace?". Might it be those migrants who never learn our language, who never even try to integrate, who take over whole streets and suburbs in our cities? Have we ever had them in our homes, offered them hospitality and tried to 'see' their culture? Indeed, if we were truly able to 'see the other', this would also make forgiveness and reconciliation possible.

Christian hospitality and Christian mission require that we actively see the guest and stranger in our worlds. This means that we will see the other as authentically 'other' and allow them the space to be who they are created to be in Christ. Failure to do this can eventuate in the most terrible atrocities. This is powerfully captured in one of Fergal Keane's moving reflections on the genocide in Rwanda – 'A Letter

¹⁰ Pohl 1999: 64.

from Africa.' On seeing a macheted baby trapped between rocks in a river, he asks himself the question 'What kind of man would kill a baby? What kind of man?'. He concluded — after having experienced the hatred, the evil and the lack of recognition of the other's right to exist — 'What kind of man can kill a child? A man not born to hate but who has learned hatred. A man like you or me.'¹¹

Hospitality from the margins

The challenge of wealth

Pohl contends that the 'periods in church history when hospitality has been most vibrantly practised have been times when the hosts were themselves marginal to their larger society.'¹² This may be because they were a persecuted minority, hidden away in convents, or poorer sectors of society such as the early Methodists.¹³ The Israelites knew what it meant to be marginal – they were strangers and sojourners utterly dependent on God. So should we be, as resident aliens. But for most of us, in the West at least, this is not the case. We are among the wealthy and powerful. Somehow wealth and status seem to be counter-intuitive to offering hospitality.

In a slightly different vein, Bishop John V Taylor reflects on this in a sermon entitled 'Strangers with Camels'. He notes how Jesus came to his own people who were mostly 'poor and unlearned' and that it was amazingly good news that God had more in common with 'the uncomplicated, the humble and the generous than with the proud and self-satisfied.' This is where the Son of God feels most truly at home. But the rich rulers of the earth, symbolised by the magi, may come to Him also – they just have further to travel than the shepherds:

...it is a long hard way to those who have grown used to doing anything they want in the world from their huge resources of tradition, knowledge, wealth and power. They have so much more to leave behind. Yet the journey can be made.¹⁴

It is the same with hospitality. Somehow it is harder for the wealthy and powerful to offer hospitality. We can do it, of course, but perhaps we have further to travel.

The poor and the vulnerable

Poverty, therefore, may be a good place to start with hospitality. Poverty of heart and mind creates space for the other. Poverty makes a good host – poverty of mind, heart and even resources where one is not constrained by one's possessions but is able freely to give. Hospitality from the margins reminds us of the paradoxical power of vulnerability and the importance of compassion. Pohl cites the example of a friend of hers who directs a home for homeless people and who, every year, takes a few days to live on the streets. By doing this, he experiences in a small way what it means to be marginal and invisible. He describes the impact of this,

What I experience in these journeys is replenishing the reservoir of compassion. I tend not to realise how hardened I've become until I get out there. And when I see someone mistreating the homeless – a professional – it's a prophetic voice. It's the most effective teaching method for me.¹⁵

¹¹ Keane 1996: 232.

¹² Pohl 1999: 106.

¹³ The persecuted recipients of the book of Hebrews were reminded to keep on practising hospitality. (Heb. 13:2)

¹⁴ Taylor 2004: 19-21.

¹⁵ Pohl 1999: 123.

Making oneself vulnerable reminds us that both hospitality and engagement in mission require authentic compassion and genuine love. Somehow these are more freely expressed and experienced from a context of poverty – poverty both within and without. Poverty of heart and mind reminds us that we are the needy ones, that our hands were empty before God filled them, that we are in need of grace, forgiveness, healing and newness of life. Genuine hospitality as well as genuine engagement in mission can then begin as we realise our own emptiness and our own need for God. As we experience the divine welcome born out of divine compassion, so then we can share this grace and hospitality with others.

Hospitality as creating space

The triune God who creates space

Finally, let us consider hospitality as creating space. Pohl has entitled her book *Making Room* which is also a good metaphor for hospitality but I prefer 'creating space' as I like to think of the spaciousness of God in whom we find much space.

The very act of creation is an act of creating space. Originally 'the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep' (Gen. 1:2) and gradually God created until 'the heavens and the earth', as well as humanity, 'were completed in their vast array' (Gen. 2:1). God is the Creator God, the Creator of space – both literally and metaphorically. Furthermore, in the divine act of the creation of humanity, this marvellous act of generosity, we have the privilege of participating in this divine nature – this nature that created space and allows for spaciousness.

Of course, the divine nature is Trinitarian. God is not a monad – God is a community of three divine persons. God is also one God. These realities allow not only for relationship but also for unity and diversity. This Trinitarian understanding of God means we experience God in relationship with the other within community. Knowing God as Trinity allows space for the created individual, but only in relationship to the other. So each person of the Trinity shares in the divine nature and is in relationship with the other persons of the Trinity. There is the space to be each divine person, as each person relates to the other. They cannot each exist without this relationship. This understanding of the Trinity, expressed so wonderfully and visually by Rublev in his icon based on the narrative of hospitality with which we began, allows us to welcome others in and to reach out to others. Here, in this icon and this understanding of Trinity, we pick up many themes of hospitality already explored – of welcome, of the home or household as the place for hospitality, of relationship, of seeing the other. Catherine La Cugna, comments on this icon,

How fitting indeed that hospitality, and the quite ordinary setting of a household, should have emerged as the inspiration for this icon and so many other artistic interpretations of the Trinity. In Rublev's icon, the temple in the background is the transformation of Abraham's and Sarah's house. The oak tree stands for the Tree of Life. And the position of the three figures is suggestive. Although they are arranged in a circle, the circle is not closed.

One has the distinct sensation when meditating on the icon that one is not only invited into this communion but, indeed, one already is part of it. A self-contained God, a closed divine society, would hardly be a fitting archetype for hospitality. We should not miss the significance of the Eucharistic cup in the centre, which is, of course, the sacramental sign of our communion with God and one another.¹⁶

The triune God represented here is not a closed society but rather an open circle, an open community where there is always space. There is space for each divine person. There is space for the other. And so there is space for us, created in the divine image to be who we were created to be.

Mission as creating space

Perhaps my favourite definition of hospitality, and I have resisted giving a definition until now because the concept of hospitality has proved to be such a deep and long river with so many tributaries, is Henri Nouwen's,

Hospitality... means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place¹⁷

Immediately we can see the resonances for mission here. Mission, the divine invitation from God to enter into a loving relationship with God, is about allowing people the space to come to God in their own way; to become the person God created them to be. Mission is not about invading their space, forcing them to come to Christ in the manner of the *conquistadores*, vanquishing them in the name of Christ. Nor is mission the imposing or transplanting of Christianity to make them like us as was so often done in the colonial period. Mission also means allowing for the possibility that they may not want to change. As Paul Fiddes writes in his book, *Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, 'respect for others, of course, means that we must also be ready to be resisted by *them*.'¹⁸ Mission is rather an invitation which allows space for people to change. This creating of space may not be an easy task. It may in fact be hard work as we allow others the room to negotiate the space. Nouwen goes on to say – in what may also be a good definition of mission – that 'hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.'¹⁹

However, there is a little more to it than just inviting others in and allowing them space. We do need to invite them in and we need to allow the space for them to come in – on their terms. But this is not the end. We are offering space where there is the possibility for change to take place. We invite people in on their own terms – this is real hospitality, the divine invitation. We do not invite people in and say, 'You can come in if you believe what I believe and behave as I do'. This would be manipulation and exploitation. But mission is the divine invitation to know Jesus and this implies change. This may mean confrontation. Nouwen claims, 'real receptivity asks for confrontation because space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define

¹⁶ La Cugna 1993: 84.

¹⁷ Nouwen 1976: 68-9.

¹⁸ Fiddes 2000: 23 (italics in original).

¹⁹ Nouwen 1976: 69.

our position.²⁰ So, in hospitality, as in mission, we create a welcoming space for the other:

- a space for them to come in
- a space to feel at home
- a space where we can be authentic in our humanity as witnesses to Christ
- a space where the possibility of change is offered for the guest.

Creating space does not mean that there is no room for dialogue or for disagreement. Rather, creating space means allowing for a spaciousness in all our encounters. This is what genuinely humble hospitality can offer and this is what mission is all about – an encounter with the other in the name of Christ.

This metaphor of hospitality as creating space allows for space in the private places of our homes and our hearts as well as in the public domains as we engage in mission. Mission really is about creating space – there is a wideness in God's mercy. There is space for all to come in, the divine invitation is that whoever believes may have eternal life. This returns us to the theme of the Great Banquet where all are invited, all may come in and where, ultimately, we may be surprised at who is feasting at God's table.

Mission and hospitality

As yet I have resisted defining mission too precisely also. The definition adopted by the Anglican Communion, known as The Five Marks of Mission, is a good working definition:²¹

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

We can see here how the metaphor of hospitality is an excellent one for expressing the different aspects of mission. In relation to the first mark of proclamation or evangelism, Eugene Peterson has suggested that we use the word 'hospitality' in place of evangelism because evangelism involves invitation, welcome, receptivity and confrontation and to be most effective usually emerges out of an appreciation of our own poverty. The second and third marks of discipleship and loving service fit well with hospitality as seeing the other – it is only as we truly see the other that we can authentically offer discipleship and service. The fourth mark of mission – social transformation – resonates well with hospitality from the margins. This kind of engagement may involve a subversive approach and will take us to the margins as we encounter injustice and strive to defeat it. Finally, mission as caring for creation inevitably points to God as the divine Creator and Steward, whose image we are called to bear.

²⁰ Nouwen 1976: 91.

²¹ On the five marks see Walls and Ross 2008.

And over all of this there is creating space. God is indeed a God of spaciousness. We see this as we marvel at the wonderful diversity and beauty of God's creation – there is space and room for all in God's family; there is space and room for all in the heart and mind of God; there is space and room for all in the home and hearth of God. There is space to be free to be who we are created to be – and to welcome others into that spaciousness also. May God always grant us the grace to experience in our own lives the truth of Matt. 24:35, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'

Dr Cathy Ross is Manager for the CMS Crowther Centre for Mission Education and J V Taylor Fellow in Missiology at Regent's Park College and Wycliffe Hall. She is editor, with Andrew Walls, of *Mission in the 21st Century* (DLT, 2008).

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