

April '17 10am All Age Communion
Living Well Series: Hospitality & Service
by Berwick Curtis

(Slide of *Holy Habits* version of *living well* logo)

Today we come to the 5th talk in our short sermon series based on our *living well* initiative and backed up by the Holy Habits which will encourage us all – albeit in different ways to live healthy, purposeful and holistic lives, centred on the person of Jesus Christ.

This week we are looking at Hospitality & Service and our booklet is predicated on Mark's words in Chapter 12 "Love your neighbour as yourself" with which Jesus summarises six of the Ten Commandments referring to our personal behaviour and our response to others.

It's a truism of life that people who do not love themselves find it impossible to love and relate to others. They appear to be unaware of that God-given gregarious spirit within them. "Do unto others ..." is a basis of most religions, as well as that of humanists and other philosophies. Immanuel Kant put it like this:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."

I think I prefer: Treat others as you would like them to treat you, and that didn't take a volume of German to arrive at!

It is a given of civilised behaviour which I consider as a basic law of relationships. And our booklet gives plenty of examples of how we can put that into practice in regular ways, be it daily, weekly or occasionally. Nothing radical here, you might say, but it does need saying. Hospitality and service often come in little, imperceptible ways in which we put ourselves out for others, often at a cost in time and resources to ourselves. To me this is a sign of the spark of divinity in all of us, which is why those who reject Christianity overtly will

claim, "you don't have to be a Christian to be a good neighbour, or go to church."

Maybe not, but it helps focus the mind!

In our reading today we are reminded of the friendship and encouragement offered by Mary & Martha and their brother Lazarus reinforced by Jesus' grief at his friend's death. St John of course uses the story to anticipate the resurrection of Jesus at Easter and, in his Gospel, it is the catalyst for the arrest of this "rabble rouser and blasphemer".

Hospitality in the Middle East was, and still is, a very different from our understanding in the West where dinner parties are organised on a *quid pro quo* basis, you don't just drop in, and too much service labels you as a "do-gooder".

Perhaps we need to look more closely at practice in Jesus' day. There was no corporate hospitality – an awful phrase often concealing an awful reality – hotels - inns - were few and far between and offering a bed, a meal was not so rare even for a stranger. No *bona fide*, no credit card, no reciprocal invitation, no DBS checks.

Recently LLM(R)'s in Guildford had a talk from +Jo and she was clear that the laity's participation in the Gospel was not just important but vital. Referring to a recent report from General Synod, she was not just talking about lay ministers, but all of us, who attend church and claim to follow Christ. When introduced to us at the meeting as one who had previously been in the "corridors of power", working with ++ Justin, she quickly corrected it to the "corridors of service" and went on to emphasise the urgency of the Gospel not just as one of saving souls but stressing what souls are saved for.

Christ without service is a no-no. Hospitality is an attitude which, if missing, we need to develop. How can we implement this charge? For some it means active participation in "good works" - another phrase

which has developed a whole negative subtext. For others, a helping hand to neighbours, for yet others, a listening ear. Weren't we all touched by the comments of neighbours of Leslie Rhodes, killed in the Westminster attacks some 10 days ago, that he would do anything for anyone, a nice guy, kind and guileless? Shouldn't we, who claim the Holy Spirit as our own, all be like that. Yet we know we aren't. We don't put ourselves out, we don't think about the old, the lonely, the sick enough. Of course, like the First Aider, we have to think of ourselves too, be practical and realistic about our capabilities. We have to allow ourselves time, rest, exercise and so on, as we considered in the last two talks in this series, but I, for one, am all too aware that that can often be an excuse for inaction.

The recent report from General Synod which I alluded to earlier is called "Setting God's People Free" and it reminds us that 98% of practising Christians are not ordained and that we too must be empowered for service – both in our church communities and in our secular lives. We need constantly to remind ourselves that Christianity is less a "religion" – defined as a set of rules - and more a philosophy of life based on one who in an unfathomable way mirrored the God of the Universe. Hence we are Christian 24/7 or not at all, I would suggest. As St Paul wrote in Philippians:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:1-5 NRSV)

If we look back at our Holy Habits version of the logo we will see that we cannot separate out hospitality and service – it impinges on

justice, on relationships, on stewardship of our resources. It is tied to living well with ourselves, and rooted in living well with God.

I would like to end with a quote from the introduction to the General Synod report I mentioned earlier:

A great opportunity lies before us. It is the same opportunity that has presented itself to the Church in every decade for the last 100 years. It is an opportunity that arguably has not been fully grasped since the days of Wesley.

Will we determine to empower, liberate and disciple the 98% of the Church of England who are not ordained and therefore set them free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence, leadership and, most importantly, vibrant relationship with Jesus in all of life? And will we do so not only in church-based ministry on a Sunday but in work at school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday? GS 2056.

How do we respond to that call?

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.

Reading: 8:30 - John 11: 1-45; All Age Communion: Based on Luke 10 & John 11 (Mary, Martha & Lazarus)

Questions

1. Any comments on a) the reading, b) the sermon material?
2. How do you love your neighbour in practice?
3. Why do all religions & philosophies come to the same conclusion?
4. What are the obstacles in the Christian community?
5. Which of the suggestions from Section 6 do you do and which could you take on
6. Why has the phrase "do-gooder" become so pejorative?
7. Do we put ourselves out in Christian service?
8. For you, is Christianity a "religion"? How would you define it?
9. Do you see a "great opportunity" for renewed Christian service?