

# God calls us to a new hospitality

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Easter 5: Acts 11.1-18

*Old fashioned hospitality: new vision: God has visited us*

Throughout the season of Easter, and until the feast of the Trinity, our Sunday gospel readings all come from John. Even so, we do retain a connection with the Gospel of this year, Luke, because we use his next volume, the Acts of the Apostles, as our first reading on each of the Sundays in Easter.

Today, hospitality is at the heart of both of those readings – and hospitality is God's challenge to us. The setting of our gospel reading is a meal table, and the reading from Acts has Peter telling the Church in Jerusalem about his revolutionary new understanding of the mission of the Church; an understanding that came to him when God told him to eat unclean food with foreigners.

John the evangelist's setting of the new commandment has Jesus and his friends gathered for a meal a long way from home. You could say they are all guests. And you'll remember from Maundy Thursday that this is the meal where Jesus washed his disciples' feet. So we have one guest at a meal doing something you might have expected the host to do; it's unsettling; confronting. It's a challenge to see things in a different way.

The Jesuit scholar Brendan Byrne says that Luke also presents the life and ministry of Jesus as a challenging visitation by God. It's a visitation that invites us to become – a visitation to transform our lives. Everyone in the gospel –

and everyone who reads the Gospel – is challenged by Jesus to grow and develop. We all feel ourselves to be under Luke's gaze; as we read his gospel, we feel the eyes of the good doctor examining us – watching how we are responding to this visitation.

So as we saw in John's Gospel today, Luke often presents Jesus as the visitor who becomes the host – and in the Book of Acts, it is the Holy Spirit who does this. Amazed, we find God at our table inviting us to receive him; Jesus inviting us to discover our true humanity; The Spirit inviting us to find salvation in the response of our own hearts, and so in our heart of hearts to find ourselves truly at home – and all because of this visitor whose very arrival is an invitation.

John and Luke ask how we receive this visitor; ask if we are truly at home in our heart of hearts; if our own hearts are fit to offer hospitality to Christ's poor. These are challenging questions; all the more challenging and confronting because they are being asked of us, the converted – us, the believers.

Luke's writing, like John's continually challenges us to new conversion. The day we were baptised; the day we gave our heart to Jesus is not enough for the long haul. On that day, we invited a guest who, for our whole lives, is going to dwell within us and continue inviting us to explore our own humanity; to search deeper and deeper in our hearts to find there the heart of God. It's confronting; it's uncomfortable. You just think you've reached a point of comfort and security in your faith, and the Spirit beckons you on to something you'd never dreamt of.

That's what we see in the reading from Acts today: believers converted to a richer understanding of the size of their faith, and of the scope of their mission. This happened to Peter as an individual, and today, we hear how he had to report on this, and to convert the church in Jerusalem to a

new sense of their identity and mission.

He arrives in Jerusalem, but the news has preceded him; the scandal – Gentiles have actually become baptised Christians. You'd think the Church leaders in Jerusalem would be elated by this news. But no; they criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles. They're locked into a view of faith that is expressed only in time-honoured rituals; the rituals they grew up with. The dears sound almost Anglican.

But Peter responds by 'explaining to them *cathexes* (in order)' what had happened. This setting out in order / step by step word *cathexes* is looks innocuous. But Brendan Byrne observes that it is the same word Luke used at the beginning of his Gospel: "I have decided to write an *orderly account*." It sounds mundane, doesn't it. But when Luke uses this word, he's telling us that what follows will be an experience that will transform us; that we are going to understand ourselves completely differently after we've heard this. So to Peter's orderly explanation.

He's going to need to do much more than win an argument here. Until a few days earlier, he'd have been at one with the angry reception committee that awaited him in Jerusalem; indignant at the Church being brought into disrepute. No; he doesn't have to win an argument here; he has to transform people; he has to convert people who already believe so that they can believe differently. That's a tall order.

He does it by showing that what's happened is actually God's work; God's doing, not his. God has given visions; God has sent angels; God has caused people to give and receive hospitality, and at the table, they've had to discover entirely new things about themselves and each other. If God has given the Gentiles this same gift that we received, who was I to hinder God? Asks Peter; how could I refuse to eat with them when God told me there was no barrier?

Even though we aren't a traditional society any more, who you eat with is still an extraordinarily personal thing. It still says a great deal about who you belong to, who you like, and who you are.

It doesn't matter how young or old you are—think about who kids included and excluded at your school lunch times; think about who you eat lunch with now – at work or when you're eating in company; how *often* you eat lunch in company at your place or someone else's. We don't eat with strangers as a rule. Communion helps us do it sometimes; but maybe it's asking us to take it further. Are there different ways we could share communion than the private way we do now? How do you feel when you think about that? (*Silence*) What do you make of those feelings?

In this time when we are preparing to formulate a renewed vision of our mission as a parish, to imagine what new hospitality God might be calling us to, I want you to search your hearts for thoughts and impulses you might have had – particularly thoughts about how our fellowship might become more accessible to wider groups of people. Have you had these thoughts, and have you talked about them with anyone? Or have you sat on them quietly, and hoped they'd go away?

I'll give you a few moments to think back now. Then at morning tea, I'd invite you to talk with someone about these impulses. Test them, and perhaps send them to Parish Council in the next little while. God may well be speaking to all of us through your heart.

Amen