

Our hospitality to others

We have been looking at hospitality all day, and I hope you have enjoyed it. I am going to provide a bit of a summary, drawing thoughts together, and then provide some challenges. My name is Jo Rose and I'm a member of the Women's Ministry team. I'm married to Andrew and I have 2 kids aged nearly 3 and 8 months.

I would be the first to admit that I am not very good at offering hospitality. It frequently scares me a little (or a lot) so in many ways I feel very under-qualified to give this presentation. However, I have been on the receiving end of much wonderful hospitality over the years. I hope I will stimulate a few thoughts and provide some encouragement.

I wonder if I'm not the only person who finds this concept a bit scary. When I have people round I worry that the food won't be cooked, or that the conversation won't flow, or that someone will get food poisoning (hasn't happened yet). I remember the barbeque we hosted when it turned out to be really cold (before we'd got the hang of the Scottish summer!) and everyone was a bit blue. I have served very wet lemon puddings to several guests (some possibly here today) until I checked the recipe with my Mum and found I'd doubled the amount of water. I remember times when the children have been wary of newcomers. I remember Christmas parties with neighbours when the topics of conversation made me uncomfortable.

Am I ringing any bells here? Perhaps you, like me, are thinking that this sounds all very well in theory but you're not sure whether it is something you would be able to do. Or perhaps some of you have been really encouraged by what we've discussed today but are wondering how you might make a start. Or perhaps you are offering hospitality in some ways but are wondering how you could develop this part of your ministry to others.

As ever, lets go right back to the Bible and see what God has said to us on this topic.

First, I'd like to think about **WHAT** is hospitality?

The Greek word used in the Bible for hospitality is 'philaxenos'.

- Philo means love, as expressed in friendship (rather than romantic love)
- xeno means stranger, as in xenophobia, fear of the stranger

So when the Bible talks about hospitality it means loving the stranger.

But who is a stranger? I'll give you a moment to think about that.

<PAUSE> I think it must be anyone who we do not know well, or anyone who is not quite like us. This could mean a visitor at church, a neighbour who is a little bit different from us, someone from another country or someone we have known for years but never got beyond the weather and where we are going on holiday next.

Hospitality in the Bible is so much more than making a meal or a cup of coffee. It is a whole attitude. It is how we view every encounter we have with anybody. As Shiona spoke about earlier, the ultimate act of hospitality was in God adopting us into his family as beloved children. As we seek to be more like Christ we pray that our minds will be transformed ever more into his likeness. So as we grow more like him we will become more hospitable.

I'm going to say that again. Hospitality is more than making a meal, it is an attitude. It is how we view everyone we meet, every encounter. If you want to remember one thing from today, remember that.

And **WHY** is this so important? Why have we devoted a whole Saturday (although those who have appreciated a day away from kids with Dad in charge may have leapt at the opportunity) to this topic? On a very simple level, the Bible tells us to do it. It also provides many examples of people offering hospitality to each other.

In the Old Testament, God's people Israel were told on lots of occasions to care for widows and orphans. They were reminded of God's care for them when they were strangers (aliens) in Egypt and instructed to care for strangers in their midst, for example in Deuteronomy 10 verse 19, *'And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt'*.

There are also specific examples of the offering of hospitality through the Old Testament. Abraham hosted angels and instructed Sarah to cook for them when they bring a message from God in Genesis 18. Rebekah welcomed Abraham's servant into her home when he came looking for a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24. The widow of Zarephath cared for Elijah during a time of famine, even sharing scarce resources which she needed for her own son, in 1 Kings 17. There are plenty of others. In each case we can see how God's purposes are furthered by these acts of hospitality.

By the time Jesus was born, hospitality was ingrained in the culture. Visitors to a town were found places to stay, even if that meant a stable in a crowded city at the time of a census.

In the New Testament we find many more specific commands to be hospitable.

- Romans 12:13 'Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.'
- 1 Peter 4:8-9 'above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.'
- 1 Timothy 5:10, in a list of virtues a woman must show to be on the list of widows comes 'showing hospitality'.
- In 1 Timothy 3:2 being hospitable is one of the qualities required of elders, and therefore expected of the rest of us too (as Paul – our Paul – explained in a recent sermon on elders).

We see examples of hospitality being practised in the New Testament. In each case, it is with a purpose. It met the needs of others as they shared resources. It edified the church. It served as a form of worship, as they remembered Jesus's death in the Lord's

supper. It was a form of evangelism.

I'd like to look in a little more detail at one hospitable lady in the New Testament. In Acts 16 we meet Lydia in Philippi. Hear what Luke records about her:

'On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.'

I think there are a number of things we can learn about hospitality from this short account.

- Paul and friends took the opportunities that God provided to share the good news of Jesus with those they met. Surely sharing the gospel is a very important part of our hospitality with those who are not yet Christians.
- God works as we do this – he opened her heart and changed her. It is not all down to us! (what a relief)
- Lydia shared this message with her household, unable to keep it to herself.
- Although she was a successful business woman, she did not consider herself too busy to offer a place to Paul and co.

By the end of chapter 16, Lydia's house is the place to be to meet with Christians. From a single encounter with the gospel she has in a short time started hosting a church! You may be a little relieved that God does not ask you to host the whole of Charlotte Chapel in your living room, but I wonder what he might have planned for you to do.

Why are we to offer hospitality? Because we are told to in Scripture. In Galatians 5:14 Paul tells us that the 'whole law is fulfilled in one word – love your neighbour as yourself'. Offering hospitality is really just another way of saying 'love our neighbour'.

So **HOW** are we going to set about doing this. I will come on to some practical aspects, but first I wanted to briefly touch on the help that God gives us. A loving and concerned Father, he does not set his children impossible tasks. He does not leave us alone to carry out his will for our lives.

When we are adopted into his family he gives us the precious gift of the Holy Spirit living within us. The Spirit of God acts in us to conform us daily more into the likeness of Jesus. In John 14, Jesus describes the Spirit as a helper who will come after him.

As we daily, by prayer and meditation on the Bible, seek to walk by the Spirit he will help us to do the things that seem impossible alone.

I'd encourage you to think about why you avoid hospitality (I know I do this, and I guess I'm not alone!). Think about your barriers. Maybe you feel vulnerable when you open up to someone, and aren't sure how much you can trust them. Maybe you are scared of getting it wrong. Maybe you know that you seek earthly praise and resent it when you aren't thanked for what you do. Identify what your specific barriers are and bring them to God in prayer. This would be worth spending some time on yourself, but lets take a moment to do it now. <PAUSE> The God who promises mountains can move is not going to find my worries about people not liking my cheesecake an insurmountable issue! More seriously, he can help me address the need for human approval that should be replaced by a desire to please him more each day.

We are presented with a **CHALLENGE** here. We are to get out of our comfort zones and start offering hospitality that really mirrors what God has done for us. What do you find easy or hard in this? Maybe you find big parties daunting but love to sit and chat with someone. Maybe you are the exact opposite, and thrive on big groups with lots of buzz but hate lingering over coffee. I know I enjoy a cup of tea with a close friend from church and a chat while our children play (fight over toys, charge around madly, have a lovely noisy time). But what about people I find it harder work to

have a conversation with?

In Romans 12:13, Paul tells the church to 'practice' hospitality. This word in the original carries the sense of pressing on towards a goal, seeking after eagerly or running swiftly to catch something. This brings the sense of effort that is expected to be involved. It is not necessarily going to be easy, but it is a specific command in Scripture and can even be good fun at times too.

Now, let us draw together some settings in which we might offer hospitality to others.

First, I'd like to think about **SUNDAYS**. Sundays at Charlotte Chapel are busy days with a lot happening, but they are also a great time to offer hospitality. On any given Sunday, there will be a number of visitors in our building, as well as many regulars who need encouragement and care. Can I give you a couple of contrasting examples. I have recently heard feedback from a visiting preacher's wife. Despite being in church early and leaving late, only one person (other than the official welcomers and stewards) came up and spoke to her. Contrast that with my husband Andrew's experience. He arrived in Edinburgh a few months before we married while I was sunning myself (sorry, revising hard for finals) in the Caribbean. On his first Sunday here he was invited to someone's house for lunch, which made him feel so welcome we never looked at any other churches but stuck here. I know of a number of people who always cook a bit more than they will need and deliberately look out for people who would be encouraged by a Sunday lunch invite (and if you don't find anyone you can always freeze it!).

I know I have been prone to doing 'business' on Sundays. How about making some phone calls during the week to catch up on things that have to be said or to make play dates. That would free Sundays from dashing around trying to find people and allow us to speak to visitors.

Try the radical step of sitting somewhere that you might not normally choose, or turn round in your pew (if neck muscles permit)

and speak to the people behind you. Perhaps offer to help in the creches or with tea and coffee. Become a steward or a welcomer. I've always found that I get to know people as I serve alongside them more easily than just striking up a conversation. If you're not sure how to do any of these things speak to me afterwards.

As a Mum, I suspect I'm not alone in hiding behind my kids 'sorry, got to rush, Tim needs his nap', or 'I'd better go and see what Rachel is up to'. While children can be excellent ice-breakers in many ways, I sometimes need to be reminded not to use them as an excuse not to engage with people I find it harder to talk to.

Charlotte Chapel is a big church. In the building there are at least 5 levels, and on a Sunday morning there will be hundreds of people. This can be a big barrier – 'lounge phobia' is a real phenomenon that I suspect many of you can relate to. However, I'd challenge you to work at this. Maybe set yourself a target, such as 'this morning I am going to talk to one person I don't know' or 'this evening I am going to ask so-and-so how things are going with colleagues at work'. We all fear starting a conversation with 'are you new' to be told 'no, I've been here since 1887', but at least you would be able to ask that person a lot of questions! A really simple thing you could try is learning some names on a Sunday. For members, there is now the photo directory on-line – all you need is a password from the office and you can answer all those 'so what does Andrew Rose look like' questions.

One tip I have picked up but not yet put into practice is writing things down to help me remember. I know some people remember everything they hear, but I don't, and I find myself thinking 'now was she just going for an operation or was it her Dad that had moved overseas?...'. I know of several people who write notes after a conversation and then follow up. This goes a long way to making people feel loved. The old-style would use index cards, and the more techno-savvy can use their i-whatevers. Carry your prayer diary with you and write things down as you leave.

Another place where we can really get into offering hospitality is within our **FELLOWSHIP GROUPS**. I nicked most of the following

ideas from an American talk, but I'm not going to apologise for that as I think in many ways the Americans are better than us reserved Brits at starting conversations with people. Maybe they could learn from us in going deeper, but I don't want to generalise or offend!

- Try rotating meetings around people's homes, allowing people to welcome the rest of the group. It is important that this doesn't become a catering competition – a packet of Digestives served with a great welcome and a personal chat would be much better than deliciously light home-baked sponge cakes and no chat at all.
- Do evangelism as a group, inviting non-Christian friends round to an 'open house' party. Share in the prayer and preparation.
- Celebrate milestone events together, anniversaries, kids leaving home, good medical news etc.
- Adopt a member of our missionary family (each group should have one or two allocated already). Find out their birthdays and send cards, let them know you are praying and be about to help when they are on home assignment.
- Take your hospitality 'on the road' – take a meal to a member of your group who is housebound or in care and stay for a while eating, playing games, talking etc. This is a lot less scary when 2 or 3 of you do it together.

Of course, these can work for any small group of people. The real beauty of a Fellowship Group is that it contains a cross-section of the church, with people at all ages and stages. By the way, if you're not in a group and would like to be, just talk to me afterwards.

Finally, I'd like to think about **PERSONAL** ways in which we can offer hospitality. I'll say straight up that all of us are in a situation where we can do this. If you live alone, or in a shared student flat with a bunch of non-Christians, or in a mansion with a huge party room or anywhere else you can do this. Maybe not in your own home, but get creative.

A great way to be hospitable outside your own home is to use one of the great coffee shops that now exist every few yards in Edinburgh. Someone else will make the coffee, provide a sofa and even clear up after you! You could think about inviting someone for coffee after church to carry on a conversation you've started in the

pew. You could take a younger person or someone who is in need of encouragement. If the idea of being one to one is a bit intimidating (or might feel a bit like a date) gather a small group.

In your home, invite friends or neighbours or random people you've just met at church. The food doesn't need to be fancy. I have served guests pizza from Tesco and salad from a bag. Think about inviting someone who will be away from home at Christmas round to share your family celebration. Or go for less obvious events. Andrew's speciality is cooking pancakes, so we've often had a pancake party around Shrove Tuesday.

Of course, you don't need to provide all the food yourself. It can really help people to feel more relaxed if they bring something with them. Get people involved when they arrive too if they would like, especially if you have a group who do not all know each other. If someone offers help, always try and say yes, and perhaps have some jobs left for people to do like preparing a salad or laying a table. Sometimes it is easier to talk while you do something.

If you have kids, involve them in this too, so they can start learning the art of hospitality. I'm looking forward to my two being able to carry round a tray of biscuits without eating them or spilling them all over the floor. Older kids could get involved preparing part of a meal. More importantly, they can get used to talking to people who are not just like them.

If you have visitors staying for a little while (or a longer time, as some of us have heard about today), let them be a part of your life and routine. Say grace together before meals. If you have a shared prayer or Bible time invite people to join you. One family I know have the tradition of a 'big question' over a meal. A question is posed (anything from 'who would you most like to meet from history' to 'what has God been challenging you about recently' or anything you like really). One person has been warned in advance and goes first. They then nominate someone to follow on, until everyone has had the chance to speak. I have seen this allow people to really open up about themselves, and it certainly gets conversation away from the weather and holidays.

Our students love to be a part of a family. I remember going to visit a friend when I was in first year of uni and being a little overwhelmed by her sofa and real carpet. You could sign up for the 'home from home' team, and adopt a student or two. People from both sides of this comment how much they have gained as they share together – imagine someone with loads of energy who will play football with your children after Sunday lunch!

At our last women's ministry event we highlighted one-to-one mentoring relationships between older and younger women as a Biblical model for helping Christian women grow. A really personal form of hospitality is to share your life with someone in this way. If you're interested, speak to me or anyone from the Women's Ministry team.

I have thrown out a lot of ideas here. I hope during the course of today you have had the chance to reflect on this topic and identify a few things that you could try. If you are anything like me, though, I come to this sort of event and think 'great, can't wait to start', and then somehow life takes over and six months later nothing has changed. I wonder if you would appreciate a few minutes now just to think some of this over. Spend some time in prayer about the things that have challenged you, right through the day. Make a few resolutions of things that you would like to do. If it would help to talk it over with the person next to you, feel free, or you might be happier thinking on your own.

<5 MIN PAUSE ?MUSIC>

Maybe I could just close that time in prayer.

Father God, we thank you that you are the ultimate in hospitality. We praise you because you have chosen to adopt us into your family. I thank you for each woman here today and ask that you would help each one of us to put something we have heard today into practice. We ask that the women of this church would be renowned for being welcoming and interested in all they encounter. We ask all this that your name would be glorified in Edinburgh. Amen.

Hand over to Alison