

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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*Rector of St James*

**Pentecost 19**

**11<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**Readings:** Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 20-24;  
Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14.

***“Hospitality”***

### **The Glencoe Massacre**

The rugged hills were bare, and winter's snow lay thick and cold on land that witnessed a tragedy of misplaced trust and betrayal. It is a three hundred-year-old tale of duplicity, murder and ferocity, that reveals the worst of human nature when it is lived without compassion, wisdom, or grace.

In the remote parts of Scotland, it was the custom to welcome travellers who passed through your lands, especially in the bleak winter months. This was no less the case with those who were 'official guests' from the crown or church, as it was with kith and kin who had a right to hospitality. It extended to accommodating and feeding the visitors.

On 13 February 1692, soldiers under the command of Archibald Campbell, 10th Earl of Argyll, were camped on the lands of The MacDonald of Glencoe. It was thought to be a peaceful sojourn and the Glencoe people had shown the usual hospitality. It suddenly came to an end when the visiting troops received orders to kill all those associated with the MacDonald's. The soldiers turned on their hosts and massacred them – resulting in the deaths of the chief, 33 other men, 2 women, and 2 children.

It was a heinous crime under Scottish Law to commit 'slaughter under trust' - where someone who was being shown hospitality turned on their hosts and killed them. Although, it was perhaps a law honoured 'more in the breach than in the observance' down through Scottish history – a case of domestic policy by 'other means'.

The pretext for the massacre was that the Chief of the MacDonald's of Glencoe, had not taken a compulsory oath of allegiance to the new King and Queen by the required time; although, he could not do so because there was no magistrate available to administer the oath. A more nefarious proposition was that it was ordered by a neighbour, John Campbell, who had had been in conflict with the MacDonald clan for some time. The subsequent inquiry could not determine the cause of the massacre, but the story became an infamous one of the betrayal of hospitality and ensuing enmity.

## The Giving and Receiving of Hospitality

Hospitality is relational, it is a two-way thing that reflects our beliefs and understandings about humanity and the world we inhabit; and because it is about how we treat one another it has clear implications for public ethics, morality, and justice.

Hospitality also has theological implications. Is God a god of hospitality that is extended to all, or is God a god of conditional grace, that extends a welcome to members of the tribe of true believers but excludes or expels those that do not belong or measure up? The Parable of the Wedding Feast may seem problematical in this regard. But first let us look at the bigger context.

Ancient Judaism was pro-hospitality. As it was in the remote glens of Scotland, the stranger who came in peace was to be welcomed and provided with food, drink, shelter, and protection. It began with Abraham entertaining three angels at Mamre, from which came the promise from God that he and Sarah would be blessed with a son in their old age (Genesis 18). Interestingly, this scene changes profoundly in the next story regarding Lot and the city of Sodom where there was a lack of hospitality. Two angels visited Lot but were not provided a proper welcome nor appropriate safety by the people who lived there. The sin of Sodom was the failure of hospitality and it ended in destruction.

The principle of hospitality to strangers is set out in the ancient Jewish law or Torah. In both Exodus and Leviticus, God's people are exhorted to 'not oppress a resident alien' (Exodus 23: 9 & Leviticus 19: 33-34), but instead to 'love the alien as yourself'.

This view is likewise reflected by Jesus in the two great commandments: '*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself*' (Matthew 22: 35-40). It affirms that the stranger should be welcomed, provisioned, and given respect. The ethic of hospitality is most forcefully instilled in Jesus' teaching about God's judgement. He said:

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ... Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."*

*Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

(Matthew 25: 31, 34-40)

How we treat others is a revelation of how we understand ourselves and God, for it is an acknowledgement (or otherwise) of the Spirit of God that resides in the other person. This extends to refugees, the needy, those with whom we disagree or are in conflict (even our enemies), and those who are not part of our sect, tribe, or class. But it is a two-way thing, hospitality needs to be both given and received graciously. As with Glencoe, to abuse the generosity of others is as much a sin as to refuse to give hospitality.

### **The Realities of Life**

Many of Jesus' parables are based on incidents from everyday life, even down to particular events and people. They are sometimes not so much descriptions of how things are meant to be as revelations of the realities of life that we should reject - the Parables of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16) and the Ten Talents (Luke 19) are good examples.

Before the Parable of the Wedding Banquet is the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants – both propose reversals of what are considered to be the natural order of things. In one the tax collectors and prostitutes enter God's Kingdom before the religious leaders, and in the other the tenants (symbolising the religious leaders) who were given responsibility for a vineyard (a symbol of the nation Israel) proved to be greedy and vicious – and they were destroyed.

These are the realities of life that Jesus described to his listeners. The leaders of Judea were presented as partisan and self-interested. Instead of being concerned for the common good they only looked after their class and religious tribe to the detriment of those they disliked or who were outside their group. Their behaviour was like a metaphorical 'slaughter under trust'.

This may be the way of the world, but it is not of God. The religious and political leaders of Israel were meant to be leaders for all. Kings are to rule for the benefit of all subjects, prime ministers are to have an interest in the welfare of all citizens not just members of their own party, judges are to dispense justice impartially, bishops are to be concerned for the salvation and just treatment of all people and not only for those of their own sect.

So, what are we to make of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet? The world of Jesus could be violent and unfair. Powerful political groups such as the Roman authorities, the Judean court, the Chief Priests and scribes, and the Pharisees, jostled for power and position; but there were consequences when it led to neglect of the common good.

There are two accounts of this parable in the Bible, one in the Gospel of Luke and the other in Matthew, and they have subtle differences. The Matthean version describes it as a 'royal wedding feast' and includes malicious behaviour that is not present in Luke. The King invited the guests, but they were disinterested and refused to come; some responded with violence. The King's response was also violent, leading to destruction. It perhaps reminded Matthew's readers of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD after the refusal of God's hospitality in Jesus. Some may also have remembered Sodom.

The King's ultimate reaction was to open the feast to the people of the street; both the good and the bad. The parable is a judgement against the ruling authorities of Jerusalem and its temple, the tests of kinship, respectability, class, and power that normally applied to a banquet invitation were set aside. The feast was therefore made open to all, which prefigured the inclusion of the gentiles into the 'heavenly banquet'. We therefore remind ourselves of God's invitation and hospitality in this act of Eucharistic worship today, in which we are nourished by the Scriptures, prayer and Sacrament; our job is to respond.

### **The Iona Blessing**

In another part of Scotland, (bare, remote, and wind-swept), is a place centred on God's hospitality. The monastery on the Island of Iona has housed several expressions of Christian community over its almost 1,500-year history. It was established by St Columba as a place to 'represent the pinnacle of Christian virtues and as an example for others to emulate'. This was the Celtic approach to mission – open, engaging, and hospitable. But it was later destroyed by the Vikings.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a Benedictine monastic community was established on Iona, and the principle of hospitality continued through the application of its Rule - welcoming guests 'as if they are Christ himself'. But this monastery was later destroyed by the Scottish Reformers under John Knox.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the support of the Duke of Argyll (no less) and Presbyterian minister George MacLeod, the abbey ruins were restored and an ecumenical Christian Community established. The Iona Community continues to exercise the gift of hospitality to all people 'regardless of age, race, sexual orientation or religion'. Hymnwriter, John Bell, is a member of the Iona Community, and in the following words he proclaims the hospitality that is offered us in the Eucharist:

Among us and before us, Lord, you stand  
with arms outstretched and bread and wine at hand.  
Confronting those unworthy of a crumb,  
you ask that to your table we should come.

Who dare say No, when such is your resolve  
our worst to witness, suffer and absolve,  
our best to raise in lives by God forgiven,  
our souls to fill on earth with food from heaven?

No more we hesitate and wonder why;  
no more we stand indifferent, scared or shy.  
Your invitation leads us to say Yes,  
to meet you where you nourish, heal and bless.

(John Bell, b.1949)