

A couple of weeks ago I was sitting in a hotel room in Singapore reading a sermon delivered by the Rev. Ockert Meyer the previous Sunday here in Canberra.

Ockert's sermon was based on the passage in Genesis 18 where Abraham asks God to wait while he attends to three visitors who have suddenly arrived at his dwelling and how this action was illustrative of the ancient teaching of Judaism which says "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence"---the understanding that hospitality to strangers is a vital expression of one's faith---and that the extension of hospitality was of such significance that God could be asked to wait.

As Ockert said, Abraham understood the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger.

Today's reading from Matthew concludes a chapter where Jesus has been instructing the disciples he is sending out about the variety of ways they may be received, both negatively and positively, and how they themselves should give and receive hospitality.

All of the above set me thinking about this whole concept of what constitutes true Christian hospitality. To start with it obviously doesn't mean just offering a cup of tea to a casual caller or even a bed for the night to a relative or friend.

At an individual level hospitality has to be when we really give of ourselves, when we really get alongside someone and try to understand them, when we are really sensitive to them and try to put ourselves in their shoes. That is what true hospitality is all about.

And that is the basis of that strange word "pastoral care" that we use in the Christian church—it has to do with looking after people, nurturing them, nourishing them, caring for them. Just as farmers care for their crops and animals, so pastoral care in Christian terms has to do with looking after people—all people even the ones we may not particularly like or who may not appear to be socially acceptable.

In biblical terms this group of people are often referred to as the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind---those who need to be cared for preceding those who may be easier to deal with and perhaps able to repay us.

So who are these poor, crippled, lame and blind? I believe that they are the whole world. The whole world is poor, crippled, lame and blind. Obviously we know people who do have physical and medical ailments and we need to care for them—and people are doing so in our community all the time. But there are many people who have no obvious physical ailments but who nevertheless *inside* are poor, crippled, lame and blind. The challenge for us is to be open and sensitive enough to recognize those needs.

Sensitivity is the key. If you are feeling low, ill or depressed the one who tries to gee you up with false cheeriness and humour is not going to help you. It is the one who does listen, who seems to understand how you really feel, who really *hears* you, this is the one who can care for you, the one who extends true pastoral care.

And whatever situation we are in whether that be ill or injured, or lonely and depressed, whether we have business or work worries or whether we are just overwhelmed by the problems of life, as most of us are sometime or another, what we want at those times is someone who seems to understand, who truly recognizes our need, who doesn't brush us off by telling us to pull ourselves together or to buck up.

If we are going to extend true hospitality, real hospitality to anyone then we have to be prepared to enter into that person's world, to go out of ourselves and put ourselves at the disposal of the other person. The final verse of our Matthew reading today surely points us to that.

But what we have been focusing on to date primarily relates to our direct, personal day-to-day dealing with individuals with whom we may come into contact. There is a much wider dimension of hospitality here which can be far more challenging and gets back to my comment that the whole world is poor, crippled, lame and blind.

The church has always been involved in care in the wider sphere through the provision of hospitals, education and other institutional care and effectively were world leaders in this area for centuries until, in more modern times, Governments began to recognize that this need for communally based care and education for their people was a prime responsibility for those living in a civilized society.

In recent times the horrifying revelations of institutional child abuse have cast a shadow over the centuries of care from the church but nevertheless over the years, wonderful work has also been undertaken by the church in the health, education and welfare areas and continues to this day.

But there is also a sense that this direct and essentially individual and personalized care of people is the less challenging option of true hospitality. If we hark back to what Ockert so clearly identified, it is our thinking, our attitude to strangers, our very way of being that determines whether we can say that we are truly hospitable.

The recent census results show that here in Australia our society is changing rapidly. The number of people identifying as Christian, although still a majority, is declining, about 30% say they have no religion and Hinduism and the people of the Muslim faith are on the rise, although still in very small numbers.

To really be hospitable, to grasp the understanding that hospitality to strangers is a vital expression of one's faith---and that the provision of hospitality to strangers was of such significance that God could be asked to wait--this is a significant challenge.

The make up of Australia has changed remarkably in the last twenty years and if we are going to be able to continue to live in harmony we are all going to have to have open minds and open hearts and be able to deal with, accept and try to understand the cultural background and thinking of many disparate people.

In many ways there is not a great deal of cause for optimism when we look at how we Australians of European background, ever since the first fleet landed, have struggled to understand and accept the culture, beliefs and way of life of indigenous Australians. And now we are faced with a growing and significant number of people living with us who have very different cultures, religious beliefs and ways of living compared with longer established Australians.

Additionally, in these troubled times worldwide, there are many both here in Australia and elsewhere who are only too happy to promote fear of the stranger, closing ranks against anyone who seems different or does not meet their criteria of acceptability. Such actions and attitudes are surely the direct opposite to, the direct antithesis of Christian teaching.

As Christian people we can lead the way here against this fear and negativity. But it requires a great deal of openness and understanding and perhaps some rethinking or revisiting of our faith. It is only going to be through the grace of God working in and through us that will provide us with the wherewithal to be able to express our faith in a way that demonstrates true hospitality.

The maxim of Jesus to “do unto others whatever you would have others do unto you” and the example of Jesus, who was ever intent on breaking down barriers between people, should inspire and inform our way of being in the future.

I pray that that might be so.

Amen