

Philoxenia — Love of Stranger

Scripture Luke 24:13-32

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had

indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

Notes

Philoxenia, (Greek for 'love of stranger'), was inculcated as a virtue long before Christianity. For ancient civilisations it was considered the pillar on which all morality rested, with Homer's *Odyssey* describing it as a "measure of society's moral health". The people of ancient Israel saw themselves as strangers in a foreign land thus took the responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers very seriously. Indeed, in no fewer than 36

places does the Hebrew bible command us to love the stranger because the stranger shows us God.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Heb 13:1-2)

In the Gospels, hospitality is intimately connected with love. It extends far beyond the notion of transactional



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service; we pay for service, in fact our entire culture is built upon it. In counter-cultural fashion Jesus acted as both host and stranger – certainly he relied on the hospitality of others but as gracious host he exemplified the willingness to welcome those with nothing to offer in return. He portrayed a delicate balance between host and stranger, insider and outsider, master and servant, first and last, giver and receiver... and each component mattered equally. In so doing he placed mutuality and dignity at the centre of human relationships.

A stranger is always seen from the perspective of one who is an insider. It is the insider who sets the boundaries and defines the terms by which the stranger is perceived. The stranger is by definition out of place and thus at a position of disadvantage or vulnerability. On the journey to Emmaus Jesus demonstrated the value of welcoming a stranger. Cleopas and his companion were insiders and Jesus was the outsider. Yet, it was precisely as stranger that Jesus enlightened the insiders, bringing to them an understanding of their own story, causing their hearts to burn and giving them hope.

When you are the Stranger, I am in control

The story goes like this:

You, the stranger, have come from somewhere else and have arrived at my place: I am at home, at the centre of my familiar world. Therefore, I have higher status than you and can orchestrate the encounter. I do not know much about your own background and may not be very interested. But because I am a cultured and socially responsible person, I will take care of you and indulge you, though not, of course, indefinitely. We have a proverb that says “on the first day, the stranger/guest smells sweet; on the second day the smell is getting stale; by the third day, the smell is like a dead fish.”

I am in control, and I will ask you polite questions about your background, though I do not expect long-winded and detailed answers. I do, however, expect you to appreciate what I offer you, and indeed what I possess, both materially and in terms of my personal status. I can afford to indulge you, but you should acknowledge my generosity. You don't need to worry about anything: I will look after you.

Actually I feel a bit sorry for you. You don't seem to have much initiative, and some of the things you say are really quaint and odd. You are a bit strange. I'm glad I'm not you.

There are gifts only a stranger can bring:

1. a different history and life experience
2. different resources, with potentially creative solutions to common problems
3. expanding the world merely by virtue of being there and being a catalyst for change
4. renewed energy or motivation
5. opportunity to examine the closeness of borders
6. a mediator or bridge-builder for a community's internal factions
7. potential to be marginal, ambiguous, challenging while personally disinterested

Any community which embodies warm hospitality to strangers contradicts contemporary messages about who is valuable, inviting growth. Such communities are places of hope that the world does not have to exist in class and racial warfare.

When I am the Stranger, you are in control

In reverse circumstances, the story might read as follows:

I, the stranger, have come from far away and I am tired. I am glad to be here with you, and though I would dearly like my privacy and freedom, I am truly grateful for your hospitality. Nevertheless, I will be glad to get home again. I really don't know what is expected of me, and I feel both useless and self-conscious. It's quite pleasant to be looked after, but I have no idea of what will happen next, and I feel powerless to do anything about it.

You are very kind, and yet I find I am always trying to please you and to read your mind. I want to give you the answers that you seem to want, so I look for clues in the kinds of questions you ask. But this is rather enervating: I can't relax.

I have my own thoughts and patterns of behaviour, but you don't seem to want to know about them. I always feel that I'm being scrutinized. Actually, I'm beginning to feel very resentful of you and all you have, and even of the relaxed way you sit there being kind to me. I feel you are sometimes just a poseur, and if I could get up and leave, I would. But I'm stuck here.

Anthony Gittins, A Presence that Disturbs



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Questions for reflection

1. Consider the experiences of host and stranger. Do any elements of these surprise you?
2. Who are the strangers in our ministries? In our nation or world?
3. Do we recognise the gifts strangers bring to our community?

Closing Prayer

This night Jesus offers us a place at the table:

Where we have made it our business to be first in the queue, as though it were our right;
he asks us to hang back and wait on the generosity of others.

Where we have ensured that the scales would always be tipped in our favour;
he asks us to empty our pockets and hold out our begging bowl.

Where we have spent too long at table with those who
bolster our image and protect our security;
he asks us to share bread with the excluded and the forgotten.

Where we have 'ummed' and 'aahed', taking too long to choose
from the vast array of food on offer;
he asks us to sit alongside those whose stomachs are rumbling.

This night Jesus offers us a place at the table.

(Dilly Baker, A Place at the Table)

