

Kenosis – Self-emptying

Scripture Mt 25:31-46

The Judgement of the Nations

‘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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Notes

This passage in Matthew’s Gospel powerfully connects hospitality towards fellow humans. The act of welcoming the stranger takes on heightened significance when it is Jesus himself being welcomed. The sight of Jesus does not eclipse the particular human being who stands there in need, but it challenges Christians to offer the most gracious welcome possible.

Central to the narrative is the reminder from Jesus: **“I was the stranger.”** The notion of **kenosis** is key to the paradigm of hospitality and key to the mission of Jesus. It refers to a denial of the status that lifts us above others, a self-emptying. As Jesus demonstrated by washing the feet of Peter (Jn 13:1-7) we cannot be hospitable if we presume arrogance over others. The question for Peter, as it is for us today, could he allow such humility?



Kenosis – Self-emptying

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil 2:1-11)

We can be very good at identifying the other as stranger and being welcoming, but less good at remembering that sometimes we are the stranger which means relinquishing control and humbling ourselves. If we could learn to sit in either role it would significantly shift power structures in our relationships. As host Jesus gathered people, made them welcome, served them and restored dignity to outcasts. As stranger he relinquished all status and offered himself to others.

To embrace the role of stranger is to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty, surrender and vulnerability. The receiver becomes a giver as the outsider is encountered and embraced. From the moment of his birth Jesus was a stranger: the homeless child of homeless parents, living at the margins of civilised society and dying in disgrace outside the city walls. His own community neither recognised nor received him but outsiders did. Perhaps that is the challenge of discipleship; to encounter boundaries of discrimination and to attempt to erase them by graciousness, vulnerability, hospitality and compassion.

It is not enough to simply welcome ‘the other’ into our world if we remain at the centre. We are called also to leave our own comfort and place ourselves at the edge of other people’s world, to become strangers ourselves – otherwise we risk becoming gatekeepers rather than disciples who risk encounters...

outside-in = we are commanded to welcome the stranger

inside-out = we are commissioned to go to the margins and to the marginalised people

displacement = willing to become strangers ourselves, the cross boundaries into the world of the other

transformation = embracing radical simplicity and committing to intentional redistribution of wealth and security to encounter our most invisible and alienated neighbours

conversion = to become as concerned about strangers and aliens as we are about our own security

Questions for reflection

1. Why is the experience of being a stranger crucial to being a good and gracious host?
2. Our ministries are all places of warm welcome. How can we challenge our staff and students to ‘become the stranger’?
3. What do we risk through *kenosis*?

Closing Prayer

Jesus,

you stooped to the ground making yourself vulnerable for those you loved.

Release us from the need to dominate and may we recognise you in the faces of the weakest.

Jesus,

you were intimate in love, holding close the one who leant on your breast.

Help us to be open to giving and receiving love, that we might honour in our lives your prayer for us to live as one.

Jesus,

you wept as you faced the horror of your future.

We pray for all who are weeping tonight, for those who fear the future and for those who are facing their death alone.

Jesus,

you knelt alone in silence.

We pray for ourselves in our aloneness – for those parts of us that cannot be shared with others,

those parts that we hardly dare own ourselves.

Hold us, this night and every night, in your embrace,

Amen

(adapted from Dilly Baker, A Place at the Table)

