

Reflection on Mark 6:1–13
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Jesus returns to his hometown for the first time since beginning his ministry and is stunned at the unbelief and lack of welcome he encounters there. Though his reputation as a wise teacher and healer proceeds him, it seems his familiarity as a son of the village prevents the townsfolk from seeing Jesus for who he really is.

“Is not this the carpenter... the son of Mary... are not his sisters and brothers here with us?”

In the response of the townspeople, we see a kind of domestication of the Gospel, a taming down of the radical nature of God's love as revealed in Jesus. They think they know this Jesus. He's just like them, in fact, a hometown boy. There's nothing special to see here. The text says the people took “offense” at him—a Greek word that denotes spiritual resistance and the putting up of barriers. Thus Jesus could do no deed of power among them.

In contrast to the layers of opposition seen in the hometown folk, Jesus instructs the disciples to head off unguarded and unencumbered. They are to take nothing for their journey—no food, no bag, no money, not even a change of clothes. They are vulnerable and completely dependent on the hospitality and goodwill of those to whom they are travelling.

This image of being unguarded and unencumbered is a compelling one to consider, I think. What might it be for us to move through life with such freedom and openness? to be deeply aware of our interdependence and more accepting of the generosity of friends and strangers? Certainly this way of being flies in the face of the extreme self-sufficiency expected of us by western society, but might it open us to the deeds of power Christ wishes to do for and through us?

Hospitality has deep roots within Judeo-Christian culture. Welcoming another, especially someone in need, wasn't simply an exchange of kindness, it was a mark of faithfulness to God. From the earliest days, it was understood that we are called to welcome others for, in doing so, we may be entertaining angels unaware.

The pandemic has strained this view. Others have become a source of contagion and therefore a source of fear for us. In the interest of safety and public health, we've been required to close borders, wear masks, physically distance from one another and sanitise our hands after touching. Yet, despite our best efforts, the mutating virus remains a threat and only time will tell what the lasting impact of the pandemic will be on community life.

Some of the most vulnerable during this time have been the recent arrivals to our country. Detached from familiar systems of support and lacking the ability to establish new networks, we have seen migrants and asylum seekers struggle emotionally and physically. The sense of dislocation and self-doubt that are part of any migration experience are amplified because of the pandemic bringing some in our community to the brink of despair.

Caught up in the crisis of the last eighteen months, our leaders seem to be unable (or unwilling) to bring compassion and a needed rethink to our immigration policies as the recent plight of the Biloela family seems to demonstrate. And this week, Refugee Week, a decision by the High Court reaffirmed the government's right to keep people in detention indefinitely under our current migration system.

So, the call to express hospitality remains as urgent as ever. And to be truly faithful in it, hospitality must be more than a warm-sounding word or the serving of food and drink—especially only to those who are like us. In Christian community, hospitality opens the doors of our hearts and minds to all in ways that enable us to encounter Christ in one another.

And this is where the real power lies. For hospitality requires that we unload constantly the attitudes and attachments that in the words of Noel Davis “keep our love restrained.”

Last year, for instance, a woman I had just met told me a heartbreaking story about her living situation that had become untenable for her and her two young daughters. At her request, I spoke with her property manager and advocated as best I could for a change to be made in her situation. But, through this conversation, I was given a more wholistic and complex view of the circumstances.

When I met with the woman again, she insisted on repeating her story despite the information I offered. I felt as though she was not being completely honest or at least self-aware and was, in fact, trying to manipulate me. In the end, she did not press the matter any further and expressed her appreciation for the food and other support we were able to give her.

But I left feeling unsettled and upset. I shared my experience with Avril who immediately responded, “Good on her for trying!” Avril helped me to see how this woman’s strategies and behaviours could also be seen as signs of resilience and coping, especially given the patriarchal nature of her cultural background. She was doing what she could to care for herself and her children.

This encounter caused me to reassess my view of things and encouraged a change of heart in me. I became aware in a new way of the true demands of hospitality—namely the relinquishing of power and the greater vulnerability it invites from those of us who are holders of privilege and place in society.

Just as we might add another chair to the dining room table or allow our routine to be unsettled by a guest in our homes, the encounter of Christ in another causes our love to widen and expand. We are stretched and changed *for the better*. As painful as this experience may be at times, it is a liberating process that reveals the presence and work of God in our lives.

To feel ourselves welcomed in and woven into the fabric of creation is healing medicine in a world torn apart and frayed by forces that amplify and even exploit at times the differences between us. As we continue to discover anew how to be church in these times, may we resist strongly the fear of the other and seek ways to form connections and open ourselves to the sacred presence—the tiny light—that exists in us all.