

## **Entertaining Angels (The Tablet – Nov 2004, Advent)**

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MOVING to a new area can provide the opportunity to search out a new parish. I have recently bought a flat in the Bournemouth area, so have spent some time exploring some of those parishes in the neighbourhood. Last week Diana Klein wrote in these pages of the need for God, particularly at this time of year, to be seen to dwell among us. Yet all too often it is easy to become indifferent to the lack of welcome, to God not being present. I am no longer surprised when I am not spoken to or even made eye contact with, because in many of our parishes this has regrettably become the norm. It is almost as though many parishes have not learnt to welcome, and sometimes the only point of contact is when someone informs you that you are sitting in "their" pew.

As a result, I was most surprised at my initial encounter with Southbourne parish. I was greeted at the door, welcomed by the parish priest as I settled in my pew, and, perhaps more importantly, engaged in conversation by several people at the end of the Mass. In short, I felt that I had been made to feel welcome; it was not intrusive, I had not been interrogated about my life, or just handed a hymn book but, rather, had been made to feel comfortable and that my presence was important.

But why should I be more surprised when I receive welcome in a parish rather than the feeling that I could attend for the next 30 years and never really be part of the community? And what experience of welcome do people receive when they come to a parish?

Jesus gives us an explicit directive with regard to welcome. In his living and his dying he extends his arms to all. His teaching and actions are clear: "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me" (Matthew 10:40). His welcome and hospitality are unconditional. And his teaching has an edge: "If anyone does not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, as you walk out of the house or town, shake the dust from your feet" (Matthew 10:14).

Jesus did not discriminate in his welcome: he ate with sinners and outcasts and, by doing so, knew them and shared his life with them. The Anglican dean Jeffrey John comments: "This kind of witness didn't raise barriers, it broke them down. He managed to make people feel at home who would still feel completely out of place in our Church today ... the Church

is supposed to be doing for people now what he did for people then: exploring their humanity and in the process making it whole." If this is our mandate, then we are called unconditionally to welcome and extend hospitality to people. Through baptism we welcome new members into our faith community and when we share in the Eucharist we welcome the presence of Jesus. Welcome is a ministry which is far more than a mere greeting at the start of Mass; it is a commitment to enter into the journey of another, to put ourselves out a little – sometimes out of our comfort zone. The connection between welcome and the responsibility of the community is explicit: "Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying. If any of the saints are in need you must share with them; you should make hospitality your special care" (Romans 12:13). What do visitors experience when they come to our parishes? English Catholic reserve, or a celebration of cultural diversity? More significantly, do people "shake the dust from their feet" as they leave our parishes? Do we prevent people from coming to God?

Fundamental to welcome is our concept of the Church and her mission. There are parishes where the Church seems to be an ecclesiastical gentlemen's club, a liturgical and musical preservation society, or a holy club whose sole purpose is for the comfort and support of her members. The Church should not be a fortress, with carefully built fences to protect her identity and sanctity from the competition of the world, or a place where people come together each week neatly observing one another's comfort zones. This raises the question of how people see us as Church. Do those on the edge feel unworthy and unwelcome to join us?

In short, this means that each of us, individually and collectively, must welcome all to the feast – the hurt, the lame, the broken, the wounded, the sinful and those most in need of God's all-embracing mercy and love. In many ways it is at the end of Mass, when we are sent out into the world to "love and to serve the Lord", that our ministry of welcome really begins. Our liturgies should not be an excuse to escape from the world, but rather should lead us to engage with it. If we not do this, we will diminish what we are celebrating.

Very few people would have a dinner party where people were consciously made to feel uncomfortable, where people were ignored when they arrived and departed, or were not spoken to or made to feel a part of the gathering and that their presence did not matter. So why do we do this each week in our parish communities? Would it be so difficult to focus on creating a prayerful and welcoming atmosphere when people arrive? Or beyond our

means to move up in the pew to allow people to sit in space and comfort, rather than making everyone clamber over us to find a seat.

Being a welcoming community does not have to be mission impossible, but it does require the involvement of the whole parish and not just a few individuals. Starting small is realistic, maybe choosing a specific area of welcome, for example new parishioners, the elderly, the young, or even those who are present every week but whom no one really knows. Personal and authentic invitation and eye contact should never be underestimated, or the involvement of children (who do not seem to be tied up by many of the boundaries and preoccupations pertaining to adults).

The parish I attend in Clapham is probably one of the most welcoming with which I have ever been involved. One explanation for this is, I think, because the amount of lay commitment is significant. It is not just the parish priest who takes responsibility for welcome and outreach. If an announcement is made welcoming new people, it is predominantly members of the congregation who spontaneously approach and chat to people, making it a shared responsibility, not just the mandate of the parish team. Other examples include: "At Your Word, Lord" in Westminster diocese, which involves welcome and faith-sharing in small groups and communities within parishes; the CaFE resources supporting hospitality and the sharing of faith; the RCIA process, which extends a welcome to those outside the Catholic Church; and the Paulist Landings programme reaching out to "distanced" Catholics.

It is unmistakable that each of us has an individual and collective responsibility to welcome and offer hospitality. For St Benedict, guests at monasteries were to be welcomed as Christ himself, reminding us of the powerful quotation from Hebrews: "Remember always to welcome strangers for, by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2). In this period of Advent, we look forward in "joyful hope", and the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent asks us to "stay awake" and to be attentive to the "signs of the times". As part of this we must consider what we are doing and saying in the name of Christ, for if we cannot welcome others into our churches and communities, how can we welcome Christ?

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