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HOSPITALITY & HOLINESS

One of the simple and splendid things we do rather well at St. John's is the Coffee Hour that follows the 10:30 service. Unknown to prior ages of the Church, Coffee Hour provides, in the fragmented communities of the modern world, a useful opportunity for ties of friendship and acquaintance within the congregation to be renewed – and made. And there can be few churches that do Coffee Hour with such style. No styro-foam coffee cups here! It helps, of course, that we have the Parish House's architectural splendour in which to gather, whose drawing rooms were designed for just such events, and it more than helps that the 'excellent women' of the parish take their turns to provide a picnic as lavish as the architecture. Theirs is a gift of generous hospitality vital to the fellowship of this parish.

Hospitality: I always feel a little sorry for the visiting tourists who come to St. John's on Sunday morning in vacation garb. You can see them coming to the painful realization that their polo shirts and casual shoes (normal in many churches nowadays) are a little out of place in St. John's well-dressed Sunday best congregation. I would not have our congregation dress otherwise – God is, after all, more important than our own comfort; he deserves the fuss – yet I would have all our visitors feel welcomed nonetheless, with grace and tact.

Hospitality is a Biblical imperative. "Receive ye one another, as Christ also received us" (Romans 15:7). "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). The point is not to pick and choose whom you will welcome, but to welcome all those whom God has chosen to send you. In coffee hour, and in the church, I think we rise to the challenge of hospitality some of the time. Perhaps our most common failure is understandable – we are so glad to see our own friends, so intent on our own concerns, that we leave the strangers standing by themselves. But in such circumstances something more is required than a perfunctory "glad to meet you". The Church is not a club, but catholic body, in principle open to all who believe. One of our parishioners, who died just this past year, Maria Willcox, was a wonderful friend to the friendless in such situations. She not only greeted visitors, she also chatted with them and introduced them to other people in the parish, including the clergy. She understood that she could talk to the clergy and her friends at some other time: but now was the critical moment for those visitors to know and feel that they were welcome. Her example is one for us all to follow.

Our other failure, I think, is when we find strangers in the next pew, or (horrors) our own, but fail to help them take their part in the service. It is easy enough to do: keep a tactful eye out for signs of their being lost, then lean over and with a smile point to the page number (or even hand them your own book). After the service that becomes an occasion for a few warm words of welcome, and an invitation to Coffee Hour. And please, don't say anything about what they are wearing!

The trick in such matters is to find the balance between (on the one hand) a generous hospitality, which can find room for some very odd birds, and (on the other hand) standards of decorum and dignity and beauty and truth – holiness.

In the contemporary church, the imperative of hospitality (inclusion) is often set against the imperative of holiness (with its exclusions), with the former usually trumping the latter. (We find this, for instance, in the move to "open communion", in which neither faith nor baptism is required of communicants. It is also found where the ethos of a vague compassion dissolves all other moral commandments.) Yet the tension is a necessary one. For what is hospitality, if there is no holiness to share with the stranger? And what is holiness, if it does not make a home for the homeless? This tension is reconciled, not abolished, in Christ, who is both purity without spot of sin, and friend of sinners. The reconciliation of holiness and hospitality is beautifully caught in the words of a 17th century hymn we sing in Holy Week, My Song is Love Unknown: "Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be". Without the beauty of holiness – both outward and inward – our hospitality has no point. Without the warmth of hospitality, the beauty of holiness has no heart.

The Word of God is proclaimed to all, without restriction on age, sex, race, or prosperity, and so the solemn assembly is open to all. But the Sacraments are reserved to those who believe, those in whom the preaching of the Word has awakened faith. And in the Sacraments, there is a certain order: baptism first, then confirmation, then Holy Communion. Moreover the clergy have the right (though rarely exercised) to exclude "open and notorious evil livers" from Communion, lest the holy things be defiled. Hospitality leads into Holiness, and does not abolish it.

The courtesies of Coffee Hour, the politeness of the pew: such little things, yet they are of a piece with the great things of our religion also, the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. By God's grace, we dress our bodies and souls in Christ; we worship him in the beauty of holiness; and serve him in the warmth of hospitality; in little things, and in great.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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