

Westgate 1 August 2004

Communion Service and “launch” of ‘Open Westgate’ mission

Readings: Psalm 23:5-6, Leviticus 19:33-34, Luke 24:13-35

Our Table is Open because it is God’s Table

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

Arriving in a strange place is never an easy experience. The first time Elaine and I visited Sydney many years ago we decided we should see the Opera House and Harbour. So we looked up the map and drove drive right into the heart of the city in our little 1974 Mark 1 two door Escort. Being only 20 something and having lived all our lives in a fairly tame outer suburb of Melbourne we couldn’t figure out why there wasn’t a nice big free car park next door to the Opera House. We ended up driving around the block about six times and feeling pretty terrified that we might never find out way out. Finally to leave our car outside a multilevel car park done the road from the Opera House and give this bloke our keys and an outrageous amount of money. Needless to say we didn’t go home with a great impression of Sydney.

For many years after that first bad impression I had a very negative view of Sydney. Then some ten years later we went back to Sydney. But this time we stay with some good friends who had grown up in Sydney and knew and loved the city. Ron took us into the heart of the city in his van and went by routes that we never could have guessed and parked in places we never would have found. When we walked the city sites we took in a completely different impression – we were guests but we felt almost felt like locals because of the welcome and love that we received.

The practice of welcome and hospitality is a practice of Christian faith and other traditions that can be traced to ancient times.

Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, hospitality to strangers is never a random act. In fact, the practice of welcoming the stranger is part of an ancient drama of hospitality that be traced back to the very beginnings of the biblical tradition when God prepared a garden home for our first parents and that continues, right here among us, today. Ever since we human beings became wanderers, as it were dwelling beyond that first garden, we have had to learn to be guests and hosts to one another.

In the Bible, story after story teaches this practice. Many of us are familiar with these stories. Abraham is in his camp, and three strangers appear. Before even asking who they are, Abraham prepares a feast. As it turns out, these strangers are God's messengers! And they bring wonderful news: Sarah, Abraham's very old wife, will bear a child! (in fact this story is encapsulated in the rich symbolism of the famous 15th Icon by Rublev **designed to take the viewer into the Mystery of the Trinity**).

Centuries later, Abraham's descendants are themselves strangers, first in Egypt and then during long years of wandering. Remember this, their holy writings urge again and again; it is when you know yourselves as strangers that you become open to those who are strangers today. The writings of the early Christians continue to teach hospitality.

My favorite story of hospitality and the welcome of God takes place on the road to Emmaus, near the end of Luke's gospel that we heard read to us. The Risen Christ is walking with two disciples, who are devastated by Jesus' death. But they don't recognize who is walking with them; Christ walks as a stranger. Because they are good Jews and night is falling, however, they invite the stranger inside to stay the night. The one who was a stranger is now a guest. At table, he breaks the bread, and they realize who he is. The one who was a guest is now the host. Then he vanishes.

The next day, the disciples will be out on the road again, themselves as strangers, as people of faith always are in this world. But they will be there looking for other strangers who need to be welcomed as guests.

We, like the disciples, have received the hospitality of Christ. We, too, go out on the road of each of our days as people who are, in many ways, strangers on that road. In the course of our daily lives we are strangers to many and many are strangers to us. In a sense this is the very essence, pain and risk of our humanity – that we can know and be known that we can love and be loved. In many ways also, we are strangers to many of the values and dehumanising structures by which our society operates.

How do we seek out other strangers, so that we may be guests to one another? What will happen during our act in the long, ongoing drama of hospitality? This is a good question as we approach a time of focused hospitality in our community next month. As we reflect on it, let's remember three things.

First, hospitality is something we must do together. We can't do it alone. A living community is the best context to extend hospitality to strangers. On our own, we're too lazy, or too self-protective; we need one another's support to break out of the stifling individualism and privitism that flows in our society's veins like a lurking virus..

Second, hospitality only makes sense as part of a whole way of life. It is just one of the practices that make up a Christian life. Last year we spent some Sundays looking at some of the key Practices of our Faith. Among these are forgiveness (we'll need it, because our hospitality will surely fall short); and Sabbath keeping (we need some rest, even when there are more strangers in need shelter waiting to get in); and singing our lives (this way of life is no grim set of duties, but a way that erupts in glad song, if we are doing it in the spirit of Christ). Hospitality is one of the many practices of our Faith and yet like the others it somehow encapsulates the heart of faith as well. The heart of God is open, the message of Christ is that God has entered

our existence and has shared our humanity.

Third, we need to help one another to practice this practice. For this, we need to practice. (Emily is practicing hard for her piano exam). Neither musicians nor hosts who are practicing get it right the first time, or the second, or, really, ever. But through practice, we do grow, as good musicians and as faithful hosts and guests.

So we practice. The small acts of welcome we give to one another, and the kindness we show together to the new visitor, the new work colleague the new kid at school, are part of this practicing.

Helping a refugee family get out here and find a house, as some of you have done in recent years, is part of this practicing. Refusing to condone hostility to those who are different is part of this practicing.

Our hearts and teardrops have some wonderful and sad reflections. Several have mentioned that a number of old friends have stopped coming to Westgate in recent years.. This hurts, and especially when the reasons are not clear. But there is also a much larger list of reflections on the hospitality and warmth that people who have come recently have felt.

This one for example:

What I love about Westgate: When I came to the church since 1996 I don't know nothing. Nobody. But they welcome my family very warmly, I never forget in my life. No only my family, they always helping refugee, my people in the camp. When I started my life in Australia – very difficult but Westgate community look after my family – I would like to say thank you very very much.

And another:

Westgate is a very accepting people – broad in its theology, not rigid (like some Baptist Churches) in searching for truth! I wouldn't be afraid to articulate my deepest and best thoughts here.

I was deeply moved by both these responses – to me they both speak of what the heart of hospitality the heart of our faith, the heart of God is about. It speaks to me of the very purpose of our community of faith – and openness of heart and life that expresses itself in many ways but is celebrated in our gathered life too.

Next month we are issuing a warm invitation to our neighbours, friends and ex-westgaters to come and join us for some varied experiences of teaching, worship, fun and hospitality. We are calling it “Open Westgate” which is not just a catchy slogan – it is in fact what we exist to be – witnesses of God's open heart and practitioners of

God's open table.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Table is the simple yet profound celebration of the open hear of God as we have come to know it through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are not strangers to this table because the host is our friend and the host invites us to be truly ourselves, truly at home and truly welcome.

Amen..