

I wonder if any of you are fans of Michael McIntyre's Big Show? I have to say I prefer his stand up comedy to his intrusions into people's phone lists and bedrooms, but I have been impressed by the calibre of some of his "unexpected stars of the show" and enjoy seeing them given the chance to perform. Today's readings feature unexpected guests as well. They are not there as entertainment, but so that we can learn from them.

As Lucinda said last week, Jesus came "eating and drinking": everything he did was done in the context of hospitality - his own, or someone else's. He was always going to a meal, eating a meal or coming away from a meal. Today's gospel reading is the account of one such meal. He was something of a celebrity, and influential people offered him hospitality, wanting to learn from him, to challenge him - or even to catch him out, if they could. The person who invited him to this meal was a Pharisee - a strict religious leader - called Simon. We don't know his motives, but whatever they were, they were hijacked by an unexpected guest, whose name we are not told. In fact apart from what she did on this occasion, we are told only one thing about her: she was "a woman in the city who was a sinner".

The story is a drama that involves just three characters until right at the end, where we find out that there were others present. Evidently it was customary when there was an important guest for the occasion to be "open house" so that others could hear him. The text implies that the woman wasn't noticed at first. Eventually Simon sees what she is doing and forms an opinion about it, which he keeps to himself - or so he thinks. But Jesus replies to his unspoken thought, offering to teach him about his attitude, and Simon gives his permission. At this point we might guess Jesus had known all along what the woman was doing and had been happy to let her continue. We might even speculate that that was why he had accepted Simon's invitation - because he knew he would have the chance to explain something important about attitude of heart in God's Kingdom to this influential Pharisee.

So the scene is set. A strict religious leader, a miracle working celebrity teacher and a sinner woman. The woman comes into the scene in an emotionally charged state while the Pharisee has the composure of one who is in his own home, with his friends, and in command of the situation. But in a short time the woman will leave in peace while Simon will end the meal profoundly disturbed. What has

gone wrong with his hospitality? Jesus explains that he has failed with three basic courtesies: no washing, no greeting and no anointing. The true host has been the woman, who has given him all three, in an intimate and devoted way.

This is a story about forgiveness, of course, but it's also about hospitality. Simon shows he understands that someone who has been forgiven a large debt will be more grateful than someone who has been forgiven a small debt. But Jesus confronts him with the implications: that the person who has been forgiven little loves little. Simon's strict religious observance must have meant that he had received very little forgiveness, and felt very little need for it: he had done very little that was wrong (or at least that he thought was wrong), and now the consequences showed in his inability to be a generous and welcoming host.

In fairness to Simon we must add that we don't know if he joined his guests in questioning Jesus' forgiveness of sins. Perhaps he was silent, mulling over the truth of what Jesus had said. Meanwhile Jesus affirmed the woman's outward display of affection as coming from her inner attitude of heart. She knew her sins had been forgiven: and "she showed great love" because of it.

Hospitality comes in many forms: Jesus had no house to invite people to, so when he wanted to offer hospitality he had a picnic on a mountainside or a barbecue on the beach. There doesn't have to have a table, or even food: it can be given wherever we are, if we have a hospitable heart. The first words of our reading in Hebrews 13 in the Greek are *philadelphia* (love for brothers and sisters) and *philoxenia* (translated "hospitality", but literally love for strangers). Hospitality is about showing love to people who are not family, wherever it happens. We are encouraged to do it because we might even entertain angels without realising it.

In our Western society it's easy to be inhospitable, in the way it was for Simon. There are many things about modern life that are a great blessing to us and we should be grateful for: education, welfare, health, justice, peace, to name just a few. But we see them all around us with everyone entitled to them - not as a gift from God, nor with any sense of the centuries of Christian teaching that have made them possible. So most of us behave in respectable Western ways towards each other, with the result that we feel little need for forgiveness and we don't receive it much. The problem is that it makes it easy for us, like Simon, to show little love.

I lived in inner London in the 1950s in an area where it wasn't difficult to come across beggars (they weren't called homeless people in those days). I was taught not to engage with them - partly for my own safety as a child, perhaps, but with the justification that now we had the welfare state and the government would look after them if they just took themselves to the right place. So I grew up with an attitude that was cold towards them. My instinct still carries that baggage with it, but my heart has softened over the years, partly thanks to my children's attitude to the homeless and partly through my own encounters with people in need.

One such was a couple of years ago near Euston station where I had arrived early for a meeting. I found a quiet place in a side street to make a phone call before I went into the building. As I finished the call, out of the blue came a man who looked unkempt, though he was wearing what had once been smart clothes. As we talked he told me he was homeless and needed money and he showed me an infected sore on his leg. We talked some more; then we gave each other a hug and I prayed for him and gave him some money.

By now my phone call and the conversation had taken up most of my spare time, so we parted and I headed off to my meeting. He left in the opposite direction. When I turned the corner at the end of the street I looked back to where he should have been and there was no sign of him. He had arrived unexpectedly and left faster than should have been possible. Was he an angel? I don't know. Whoever he was, he gave me the opportunity to show hospitality to him on that London street. I don't often have such encounters. In fact, as far as I know, it is the only time I have, although I have heard of other people having them. But the timing of it was good and I was grateful to him for helping change my attitude.

Hospitality can happen anywhere, and it can fail to happen anywhere, depending on what is in our hearts. Simon was the inhospitable host. The woman was the hospitable unwelcome guest. Jesus was hospitable to both, bringing challenge to the one and peace to the other. Which one am I? Which one are you? We can learn from all three.