

Bennochy church 28th August 2016

Are you a list person? Not the composer! A list that you have created for the very purpose of ticking them off when that task has been completed. And in so doing, you feel better for it. You have accomplished something. Maybe you have a lot of ideas going through your head and you just need to get them down on a piece of paper and fast, before you forget. You might even keep a note pad on your bed side table for that very purpose. You scribble away furiously, to be left with is a list of seemingly unconnected statements. You look at your list and wonder, is there anything that connects this list of random thoughts? When I read Hebrews 13, that is what comes to my mind. A random list, in which the author has entitled it, *How to please God*.

In the midst of rubble there are often gems. This not my favourite passage of scripture by any means, but two little phrases catch the eye: *welcomed angels without knowing it & Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever*.

I have later discovered that this is actually an ancient literary style called 'parenesis' - *moral exhortation loosely fitted together*. So my apologies to the writer of Hebrews!

I am reading a book at the moment entitled *Christianity for the rest of us* by Diana Butler Bass, where after visiting many churches in the US, she identifies, what she calls '10 sign posts

of revival' or practices of vibrant churches. The first one on her list is hospitality. So often in the church we have watered that down to identifying ourselves as a 'friendly' church (if you read vacancy adverts and parish profiles, every church is a friendly church) and we pride ourselves on giving people a good welcome. Hospitality is so much more than that.

I quote from the book, *"In such a "world of strangers," where fear, anger, and hostility build walls between people and chip away at communal soulfulness, (Henri) Nouwen proposed that "if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality." For Nouwen, hospitality is the "creation of a free space" where strangers become friends. "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change takes place."*

In a world of strangers, seeking a place to 'be' and a safe space to explore who they are and the spiritual world that lies beyond them. The church needs to welcome the angels. In a world where people journey as 'tourists' in their own land, with a sense of rootlessness and displacement; seeking something to help them make sense of the world. The church needs to offer the gift of hospitality.

It is strange language to our ears, but I quite like it! The best example is Abraham who welcomed three visitors, at least two

whom, were described as angels. The Greek word for angel is 'angelos' and simply means a messenger. Anyone can be an angel! Including us!

In a world where we are suspicious of who comes to our doors , where we are challenged to respond to those in our world who suffer things, beyond our imagination. I read something recently about the last Doctor left in the rebel held area of Aleppo, in Syria. If he is killed, what happens to those in medical need? And what happens in prisons, is just another world, a part of society we know nothing about. I suspect the context for the writer of Hebrews is that of Christian prisoners held by the Romans. None the less. what did Jesus say, love even your enemies. To the writer of Hebrews, these are all places where angels as to be welcomed and hospitality offered.

Hospitality is very incarnational. It is about entering into the lives of others. If you think about it, that is how God operates. The paradox is that he sends us angels (messengers), not to offer us his hospitality, but for us to be people, of hospitality. You see, we learn of God, not always by what we do to others, but what the other, offers to us. Some offer their grief, others their homelessness and some their poverty. These angels offer the possibility, the hope of giving God's gift of hospitality, to the other. True hospitality is never easy. It takes us to new places. It challenges who we are and how we relate to others, especially if they are different to us. Very often, angels are not like us.

So God loves a good paradox. At one and the same time, he talks about what is rooted and stable. What God offers in Jesus Christ which never changes. It is the constant of the church. The continuity of our faith. It is the eternal of '*yesterday, today and forever*'. Yet, as a pilgrim people, what is important is the journey of faith and never a settled religion. It is on the way with God, that we meet our angels. It is in the midst of our communities that we offer and receive hospitality. It is in finding out what God is up to, that we are at our most vulnerable. Trusting in God who said, watch, watch for the new things I am going to do.

Our experimentations of faith are therefore always rooted in a firm base, in the unchanging nature of God's forgiveness, compassion and justice. We can take those first steps. We can place our feet into the water. We can make the road of faith, by walking it. Knowing, that failure is never futile. It is part of life. It is how we learn. But if we never leave home, there is no journey. If we never leave home, we might have heard the call of Jesus, *come follow me*, but we have not listened. If we don't leave home we cannot be pilgrims for God. *The journey of a 1000 miles, begins with a single step.*

A step of faith. A journey full of angels. A hope secure and an open road. Amen.

