

upon the practice of ministry. Where that was in existence nearer the start of my ministry, *Ministry Today* largely provided it. That its limited provision has been supplemented today by such as *The College of Baptist Ministers*, *The Order for Baptist Ministry* and *The Oxford Research Network for Ministry* does little to diminish all the good things that *Ministry Today* has provided over the years — its journal and its conferences — so congratulations and farewell, *Ministry Today*. You will be missed.

Ministry and hospitality – the example of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1

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With good past evangelical pedigree, spending time reflecting on the characters of Mary and Elizabeth in the narratives at the beginning of Luke's gospel was a slightly dodgy business – there was no telling how far up the candle it might lead you. It was probably alright to see Mary as an example of obedience to the call of God (“Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”) and a paradigm for responding to God's call on our lives, but she was probably best left there. How much I missed (and I suspect many of us missed) by not spending time with her and the rich lessons that she and Elizabeth teach us about both ministry and hospitality.

Most pictures of the Annunciation place Mary in a house which is presumably her home or at least her parents' home. Something that is definitely heretical is my picture of Gabriel as a pre-runner of Christian Aid collectors, going from door to door trying to find someone in and who might be prepared to be the mother of the Son of God. At last, on the verge of giving up, he finds Mary at home. Either he simply ‘appears’ in the living room or has to be let in by Mary. Whichever it is, she makes him hesitantly welcome. What is a young girl to make of a stranger coming into her home – at a time when she seems to be alone in the house? Mary's first risk is to admit him and engage him in conversation. It is her hospitality

that is the trigger for a life-changing conversation. She might have been amused had she still been alive (no, not assumed into heaven!) to read in the letter to the Hebrews about the importance of practising hospitality and thereby entertaining angels without knowing it.

In past times, hospitality was virtually defined by meaning all and sundry coming through the minister's door and the minister's wife (because that's what it was) being on hand with soup or tea and cake and a smile – even if she has abandoned with some danger three small children in the bath. Hospitality is key, and this may yet be appropriate, but maybe hospitality is even more about an attitude and a way of life rather than a particular place. If hospitality is the place which affirms 'the other' and opens conversation and allows for ministry, then focus on the physical context alone may miss the point.

Yet it is in her home that Mary converses with the angel. Notice, however, how the conversation develops. It does not work along the lines of:

Gabriel: Mary, will you bear God's son?

Mary: Yes

Gabriel: That's sorted then

It is a far more sophisticated engagement as Mary puzzles and questions her way to finding her answer. She has very reasonable concerns to raise and arguments to put. Gabriel in turn does not push or demean her, but gently leads the questioning on, to a point where Mary still has some concerns, as perhaps her final answer suggests, even though it is a statement of living and life-changing faith. Has it been helpful to Mary to have the encounter in her home rather than being summoned to a religious building or interrupted out walking? Of course, there is a place for encounters in all sorts of settings, but is there still space for the minister to encounter people in their homes, to do a bit of pastoral visiting now and again rather than summon people to the minister's office? It's more time-consuming and may be more inconvenient and, in a Safeguarding age, (rightly) more complex, but is receiving the hospitality of others in order for effective pastoral ministry to be exercised still worth it?

Mary's response is the key to the most amazing piece of hospitality – her womb will become the home of the Son of God. God comes to

make his dwelling place in Jesus within Mary. I am not qualified to write about pregnancy as hospitality (for obvious reasons!), but I can't help thinking that there are some rich reflections to be explored here. God's dwelling in Mary is the beginning of his dwelling in the world – as John writes: “the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us”. Here are allusions to tents and tabernacles and glory, but also to frailty and vulnerability and the temporary nature of that dwelling. John again comments on the sort of hospitality Christ received: “He came to what was his own and his own people did not receive him”. The world will be judged on what sort of hospitality it gives to the Son of God. From Jesus' own lips this is hard to come by: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”. The last act that a man gives to Jesus is the enigmatic Joseph of Arimathea who gives him the temporary hospitality of his tomb – the place where his head can be laid.

Having given Gabriel hospitality and with him satisfied and on his way, Mary seeks other hospitality – from her cousin Elizabeth. She leaves the comfort of her home and, in the risky, early stages of pregnancy, makes a significant journey from Nazareth to ‘a town in the hill country’. For the first two years Mary, with Jesus either in her womb or in her arms, makes significant journeys – this one to Elizabeth and then back to Nazareth and then to Bethlehem and a flight to Egypt and then back to Nazareth. Here's a further reminder of hospitality on the move. Mary and the child have some demanding and hazardous journeys to make, sometimes at great risk, discomfort and danger, but there is no questioning her nurture and protection of the child. Hospitality can move from place to place and throughout this narrative the focus of this hospitality is on the one who gives it rather than necessarily the comfort of the surroundings. How might this inform the hospitality which the minister offers in unlikely places and circumstances which is no less real for being on the move?

Mary goes to Elizabeth for a good round of ‘gossiping’ between two pregnant mothers. The term ‘gossip’ is derived from ‘god's sibling’, a woman's closest friend during pregnancy and the early weeks of a baby's life and possibly (although less certain) the person who became a ‘godparent’. It was the person with whom was shared the intimate family matters of life and concerns and fears about the pregnancy. Mary visits Elizabeth, and the pair become god-siblings

for one another. Both women have lived through uncertain times – one is pregnant long after she thought it possible and that, in itself, may have been the subject of idle talk. The other is pregnant long before she should have been, which may well have set the Nazareth talk-circles aflutter.

The picture of hospitality turns again. There is a short scene of intimacy and hospitality. Elizabeth's home becomes Mary's home. Mary takes her own vulnerability with her and is welcomed in by a woman who is no longer sure of her own standing in local society. Both of them also now share a common hospitality to the Son of God and his forerunner. They share delight in each other's news and story with mutual recognition of the promises God has given them. It's fascinating that Mary did not turn to a religious leader or local institution for support, but to another woman in a similar situation. Maybe it's helpful to reflect on when it's good for the minister to stand back and allow people to minister to one another, even if they point the way to a person 'in the hill country' that they might go and talk to. There is an important place in pastoral ministry for facilitating and standing back, suggesting a way forward and leaving people to minister to one another. It is empowering to each individual. It is not ministerial idleness, but recognising that sometimes Mary needs to talk to Elizabeth and not the pastor. They both have much to give to each other at this point, even if it's tempting to intervene.

Elizabeth's hospitality provides Mary with the safe space to express her deepest words of praise to God in the wonderful song known as 'the Magnificat'. It is not widely noticed that it is in this place that Mary sings – again not the Temple or a religious gathering place, but in Elizabeth's living room. Here was the place that Mary felt at home, able to open her heart to God. We learn then that Mary stayed on for about three months and then went home. Gossiping and praise done and back to Nazareth for a far from uneventful three months and a trip to Bethlehem to contemplate. So where in the life of our local churches are the 'safe' places' where people feel at home – evidence for which would be those places where people can open themselves to God in praise and wonder, sorrow and joy, in good times and bad? It would be fascinating to quietly survey the places where we gather as church and the hospitality that that we practise and ask if these are the

places where people feel at home when it comes to deep encounter with God.

A possible response to reading this far (thank you if you have) is to wonder why an article dealing with ‘the Christmas story’ is being published in February when that is done and dusted for another year. Yet the Church calendar celebrates the events of Gabriel’s encounter with Mary on March 25th (The Feast of the Annunciation), and so the next few weeks are a very good time to read and re-read this narrative and to reflect on the rich pictures of hospitality and the implications for the ministry of the church and our own calling. Some questions may help:

- (a) What does it mean for us or me to give God hospitality?
- (b) What does our hospitality as a church to others (especially strangers) look like (ask some!)
- (c) What does ministry ‘at home’ require?
- (d) How should the minister facilitate good hospitality and ‘gossip’ between others where it may not be right for them to step in themselves?
- (e) Where are the safe places in our church/community where people can encounter God (ask again – the answers may be affirming or disturbing!)?
- (f) Evangelicals are used to the language of ‘God in our place’ to speak of the atonement, but what does it mean to talk of ‘God in our place’ in terms of the incarnation?

And final words for reflection, first from the poet Robert Frost: “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in”. And from the Church of England Service Book – the beginning of the prayer after Communion: “Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, then when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home”.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves And The Songs We Sing

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