

# Biblical HOSPITALITY



The Hospitality of Abraham | Andrei Rublev

Pre-Yom Kippur Feast in Jerusalem | Before the fast



# Jesus at the Party | BY GARY CHARTIER

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Jesus liked parties. He seems to have been a popular guest—so popular, indeed, that some people who didn't like him called him a glutton and a drunkard. He clearly enjoyed the hospitality of his friends and acquaintances.

But Jesus wasn't just a guest: in another sense, he was also a host. He was inviting everyone to come home. He was calling Israel—and, through Israel, the world—to attend an incomparable party.

Offering food and drink is an especially powerful means and symbol of hospitality. So the psalmist depicts God as saying: "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. . . . I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Psalm 81:10, 16, NRSV). God's deliverance is represented by, and finds its fulfillment in, authentic hospitality, a rich banquet. Similarly, for Jeremiah, to be in right relation with God is to slake one's thirst, to drink from a bottomless well of cool water.

Hospitality is one of the greatest gifts we can offer each other. To feel welcomed in the warm and open space offered us by another is both liberating and empowering. It is when we know that we are at home that we can relax and display our true feelings. It is when we know we are at home that we can blossom, flourish, grow. The gospel is the good news that we are at home in God. If we can truly grasp this truth—and it is anything but easy truly to make our own—we will understand that wherever else we may be at home, there is somewhere we belong.

Our own imperfect efforts to offer home to each other are sometimes profound sources of meaning and hope. It is sometimes, however, just when homes do best what we want them to do that they are distorted. For a home can all too easily become a fortress within which we hide from what is frighteningly different,

disturbingly other than ourselves. Too often, we know who we are as family precisely in virtue of who is excluded from our acceptance.

The temptation is almost overwhelming to establish boundaries that exclude and reject those who are different. The challenge posed by difference is sometimes terrifying; it can make us dizzy. Responding to this challenge seems to have been near the top of Israel's agenda during the life of Jesus. Some people argued for a violent revolution that would evict outsiders from Israel. Others withdrew from ordinary life, building barriers between themselves and other Jews as well as non-Jews and foreseeing a day when divine vengeance would sweep away sin and sinners. Still others followed a meticulous path toward holiness within the day-to-day life of synagogue, market, and household, still very much aware of their difference from non-Jews. Others, of course, were happy to accommodate the Romans and to abandon many of the distinctive features of Jewish identity.

Jesus inserted himself into the ongoing debate about Jewish identity with a perspective that differed from all the other options on the table. Intensely aware of the presence and activity of Israel's God and the value of Israel's heritage, he did not share the accommodating conservatism of the Sadducees. At the same time, however, he resolutely opposed the rigid boundary definitions supported by other contemporary groups. An Israel intent on preserving its identity at all costs, an Israel determined to exclude outsiders, was an Israel destined for destruction. This wasn't because a vengeful God would impose some arbitrary punishment on Israel for the sin of exclusivism. It was because the inevitable result of exclusivism would be the confrontation with Rome that ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem four decades after Jesus was crucified.

Jesus believed passionately in hospitality, then, but



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not in a hospitality that was part of an unjust and self-destructive project. Calling Israel to a new kind of hospitality meant urging a new openness to the non-Jewish world. But it also meant encouraging a dissolution of the barriers within Israel.

In a rigidly structured society, where shame, honor, and social position are central preoccupations, hospitality can become a means of manipulation and a source of stressful obligation. The balance sheets must be kept in order: one favor demands another. Those on the upper rungs of the social ladder cement alliances with each other through hospitality while excluding others not as favored with wealth and status. By showing hospitality to each other, the members of the upper classes solidify their position and authority.

“Stop playing the status game!” Jesus almost shouts in response. “Stop worrying about repaying and being repaid.” Jesus’ startling injunction to his host undercuts the prevailing system of reciprocal obligations that kept the needy subservient and marginal.

Jesus wasn’t issuing some sort of general prohibition of dinner invitations directed toward friends and relatives. Friends and neighbors celebrate with those who have found the lost sheep and the lost coin in Jesus’ parables. And Luke includes in his Cornelius narrative in Acts a reference to the fact that

the Roman centurion gathered “his kinsmen and close friends” to await Peter’s arrival. Luke seems not to have seen a conflict between Jesus’ injunction and the behavior of Cornelius or that of the figures in the parables. And of course, Jesus himself seems to have been enjoying a traditional party as he spoke.

But it is important not to dull the edge of Jesus’ point too much. Of course, our principal means of hospitality to “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” today are social, not personal. If we are to spread a rich banquet for the stranger today, we must do so as we structure public policy, ensure educational access, design the tax code, provide health care—all the nitty-gritty tasks of public life. Our politics, our cultural life, our church life must all reflect a commitment to offering hospitality to those we do not know—those who differ from us in virtue of skin tone, accent, sexual orientation, or social class. Our first task, if we wish to show hospitality to strangers, will be at the polling places of our cities, on the editorial pages of our newspapers, and, most important, on the floors of our legislatures.

But of course we cannot and will not welcome strangers into our public worlds while neglecting the strangers in our own private worlds. This will mean opening our congregations and our homes and our schools to the

hungry and the homeless, the unemployed and the uneducated, the people who claim our attention and our care with the “Will work for food” signs they display at off-ramps and intersections. It will mean giving of our money and our time and our emotional support to build relationships across boundaries of class and disability.

It is sometimes disturbingly easy to maintain a sense of moral and spiritual superiority when discharging obligations to the poor, duties we mistakenly regard as opportunities for “charity.” But we may feel genuine discomfort when offering hospitality to strangers. In reality, however, strangers of all varieties may be able to enrich our understanding of God, God’s world, and our place in it. Each may have something of value to offer us. As we extend hospitality to strangers we may find ourselves welcomed and our worlds enlarged. The Catholic colleague, the Mormon student, the Buddhist girl who is dating your daughter: each of these strangers may have an angel’s gift to offer if we will listen, if we will pay attention. But we must be ready to accept these gifts, to find them on offer in what we may regard as unlikely places.

God is our host for the richest of all banquets—the banquet of life. At this banquet, we, in turn, are called to host each other. God offers us a place called home. But that home is

to be a home where all people are cherished and accepted, not an exclusive club to which the impure and unworthy are denied entry. Jesus’ own ministry challenged his contemporaries, as it challenges us, to spread a banquet for all. As we do so, we help to make all people aware of what is, in any case, always true: that they are at home in God. At the same time, as we receive the gifts offered us by the strangers we welcome to our table, we learn in new ways what a glory it is to be at home with the God who invites us to the feast. ■

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