

# The Ministry of Hospitality and Servanthood. About how to live

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 January, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Isobel Bishop

Christmas 2A

**Jeremiah 31:7-14; Contemporary reading from Kenneth Leech; John 1:10-18**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SXZ73RGBg4>

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I'd like to share a few reflections today about the ministry of hospitality and servanthood - or about how to live. Let us pray. Oh God you see us as we are. Breathe into our minds and hearts the passion of your love. Amen.

All four readings in our lectionary readings for today have a common thread. Ephesians talks about singing and praising. The psalm talks about love and grace. Jeremiah, which was read to us, speaks about bringing the scattered into the gathered including the blind the lame - turning mourning into joy, rejoicing in the dance. The young men and women and the old will be merry.

With this in mind I see a Shalom or a beautiful picture in my mind. And in the gospel we hear the words grace and truth. And as followers of Jesus we become children of God. Oh what a privilege. So as children of God we have gifts to share, so that the scattered may be the gathered.

I'm going to share a little of my life experience of when I have seen someone acting as a servant, or offering hospitality to another. My dad was a suburban lawyer in long ago Gladesville, and I remember very clearly, as the youngest of three, being the one who was frequently called to answer the telephone right at mealtimes.

One of my father's clients was a woman who, in later years I found out, had been very violently abused. And way back in 1946, as a girl of ten, I came to understand that my dad had been able to achieve a divorce for this woman which was very unheard of in those days. She had three children and a violent husband - and that made a lasting impact on my life - as a child and as a growing woman.

Later on, when I was married, I went first to live in a black community in Cleveland Ohio. And here I witnessed and I was offered such hospitality by those people whose lives were broken - and yet they had hope! They offered me hospitality in their homes. In the poor black homes, they shared their stories. They talked about one man, I remember, in Jim's congregation. His grandfather had been a slave and he'd been freed. And it was just awesome to be in the homes of those people who taught me, in that year, so much.

One white woman with a small baby born there. And a white husband in a black ghetto. An unforgettable experience of hospitality and love and grace shown to me.

Following here in the poorest part of Glasgow that you can ever imagine, where the people were out of work - or if they were in work it was heavy, heavy, heavy work in Templeton's carpet factory. Very often on a Sunday, the people would come to me and say - the women would say: *I haven't got any money to put in the plate today Isabel. Willie drank it all this week.* The poverty the suffering and yet the hope. Every Thursday I went down to the mothers group and learned how to do Scottish dancing. Such love and such hospitality shown to me and to my little family.

When I returned to Australia, we were 11 years in Paddington in the Presbyterian Church there - and in that time my heart was opened and hospitality was offered to me on every hand. Especially by the people who were trying to find meaning through their art. And the grace, particularly the artists who showed me so much about their own inner journey of understanding their life and the meaning of their life through their beautiful art.

Then when I went to the villages of the world, amongst the poorest of the poor, I remember being in the kitchen in a very poor village twelve hours train ride north of Mumbai and asking the women if I could come in and learn how to make chapattis. And amongst the mice running all through the flour bags, here I was learning how to make chapattis. And what's more eating them and having such fun. And such hospitality and love and grace shown to me.

Then in Venezuela, when we were amongst black Spanish-speaking people in a little tiny village, and here I was, learning how to eat dandelion soup. That was what was growing and that was what we ate. Hospitality and love and grace being shown to me.

And finally when I returned to work in the church, in my last parish in Cabramatta, the stories, the trust, the hospitality, the grace shown to me by the people. The people who'd suffered under Pol Pot. One man in our congregation had been shot driving on his motorbike through the main street of Phnom Penh. And his wounds were very real. The trust that they showed to me, the hospitality and the food they graciously served me. Learning about the pain of their stories under the regime of Pol Pot.

All along I found grace and hospitality and servanthood being offered to me as a human being.

And now I want us to fasten our safety belts, because we're going to a different place. We're coming to our home, this home, this beautiful building and what lies around us. I was looking recently at the mission plan, up there on the back wall right at the very back. And I was reading about it and seeing what sort of things we'd said we wanted to do. What sort of wonderful things did we have in mind, as the congregation serving this local community?

And my eyes were fixed on the third, as it says, *mark for service*; and it says: *to respond to human need by loving service*. My mind and my heart leapt when I read that and I thought: "this is something that I think really is part of my future, part of our future".

I was thinking about this beautiful community. This community of grace and truth and beauty and love and hope. How will we offer hospitality and servanthood to this our neighbourhood?

How will we serve the scattered into the gathered? How would we follow the leading of the Prophet Jeremiah for the poor and the lame and the blind?

And then I thought back to 2012 or thereabout. Some of you will remember our friend Michael, who had three different names: Michael, Ali and David. He was with his shopping trolley out on the steps with his bags in his shopping trolley. That was his life, his shopping trolley and his bags.

And one day very sadly Michael died. And at that time a number of us were working very closely with the City of Sydney Homeless Persons Information Service - and we were very connected to the women and the staff who worked there under Clover Moore's direction. We found out so much about how the City Council cares for the people who are homeless and who are struggling - right in our CBD. And I thought about Michael. And I thought about "what is God saying to me about hospitality and grace and servanthood in this time in 2020".

And so I looked again at the mission plan - and I saw, under number three: *to respond to human need by loving service*. I saw the words: *strengthen and develop hospitality ministries!* And I said to myself: *wow!* This for me has the embryo, the nucleus of an idea for that building next door. I thought: *what if that building became a place for homeless people? What if that building were transformed into a building called Pilgrim Place for all those who are wayfarers, who need love and grace and support that we can offer?*

Don't tell me that it's the Synod's, or it's this or it's that or this other. For me, it could be done! It could be transformed into a building full of people who need love and care! We got so close, last time, to offering hospitality and servanthood.

So I am posing the question to you today. If you look deeply and seriously, as a member or a follower or a friend of this congregation, or a companion on the way, I pose you and I challenge you to consider deeply in your heart: what if we left a legacy for those who are the blind the lame metaphorically speaking? Those who need care and love. Let me tell you my life experience is the small amount I have given, in villages all over, the poorest of the poor in the world, I have been given back three hundred fold.

I challenge you this day to consider. We sit here in this beautiful space - and yet next door is something that has a relationship to this community. I call us to attention before God!

I leave you with a Gaelic saying: *it is in the shelter of each other that the people live. It is in the shadow of each other that the people live.*

Let us bring the scattered into the gathered. That is the good news my friends.

My grandmother, Emily Pickering, came to this church as a Sunday-school scholar in the mid-1880s. Her voice is whispering to me today - and she's saying: Isobel, just do it! Just do it!

So I'm saying to you today, now is the time and we are the people.