

Morningside

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Matthew 10: 40, 42. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.... Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Dear Moderator

I was happy that you announced hospitality as a favourite theme for the year even before you took up your duties as Moderator. I was happy because it sounded authentically you. You are famous for enjoying the company of good friends over a rich supply of the best food and drink, and you are famous for being a generous host. You are in good company: you will remember that Jesus himself complained that his enemies called him a glutton and a wine-bibber. Ever since, his church has had more than its fair share of kill-joys.

My other reason for being happy that you have chosen hospitality as your theme is that it reminded me of these words of Jesus. *Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.* True hospitality does not depend on a big budget : it depends on a big heart.

Do you remember a story about hospitality from the General Assembly you chaired a few weeks ago? None of us could have guessed it was about hospitality when it began. A Glasgow minister was telling us of a little girl who comes about the manse a good deal. She is two years old, and her family are friends with the minister and his four children: indeed the little girls sometimes has a sleep-over at the manse. Very recently she was baptized by him in her local congregation. Just a few days before the Assembly the minister had gone with the girl and her family to a hearing. Her parents were seeking asylum in Scotland, where they have been welcomed and have been made to feel safe. The argument presented on their behalf was that the child would be being returned to a country where more than fifty percent of girls suffer female genital mutilation, and therefore the chances were high that the same would happen to her. The

request for asylum was refused on the grounds that female genital mutilation was illegal in that country, whatever the actual facts and practice might be.

Moderator, we have a proud tradition in this country of welcoming people who are fleeing from danger. Obviously we do not know all the facts of that particular case; and obviously not everyone who enters our land is fleeing from danger. But some are. You will have many opportunities to speak to very powerful people in the course of the next eleven months. I hope you will use your theme of hospitality to keep reminding them of what a hospitable nation would look like; of how important it is for us to maintain our highest traditions of hospitality as a nation; perhaps even reminding them of the words of Jesus about welcoming.

A welcoming nation. What about our church? As a church do we display and offer hospitality? I hope, Derek, as you go about Scotland meeting congregations and presbyteries you might occasionally say a word about Morningside Parish Church. After all, you know quite a bit about it! We are now plunged into the midst of a great refurbishment programme which we will learn to live with over the next few months. Part of the purpose of this work is to make this building better still for the beauty and wonder of the worship of God. Here at Morningside we are all hoping that you will be able to be with us and lead the dedication when all the work is done, maybe just after Christmas.

The other purpose of all this work to help this congregation to be hospitable to our neighbours. Already at the Cluny Centre a remarkable number of different groups are welcomed into our buildings: and that service to the community will be continued here after the Cluny Centre closes, with a church here especially adapted for that purpose. Of course there is a benefit to the congregation: there is an income provided. But there is also a real sense of service to the community, a sense of hospitality; and I am sure that it will be in the forefront of the Kirk Session and yourself when you return, to develop that role of this building as a welcoming presence in the heart of Morningside.

In the course of this year you will be visiting four Presbyteries in particular: Glasgow, Duns, St Andrews and Ross. In each of these you will discover many church buildings that are closed from Sunday to Sunday: bringing no benefit to the communities in which they are placed. Here is a little challenge for you. What if you were to inspire one congregation in each presbytery with a vision of hospitality, so that four more churches could discover a new and welcoming role for their building in the midst of their parish?

Jesus said *Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, none of these will lose their reward.* It could hardly be simpler. As you know well, Moderator, my wife is a teacher of Home Economics. One of the courses she used to teach is called Hospitality Studies. It involves making sure that the food the pupils prepare does not only taste good but looks special: presentation is a key part of hospitality studies. It is a useful course and a popular course.

The course Jesus teaches about hospitality is much easier. All it involves is a little one and a cup of water. "Little ones", here, does not necessarily mean children. It means people that other people think do not matter. In Jesus course of hospitality studies you get no extras marks for being welcoming to famous people or wealthy people or people who may be able to do you a favour. Jesus explains to us all that when we welcome little people, those who are poor or weak or disappointed or simply those who cannot cope we are welcoming him. Little people and a cup of cold water.

A cup of water makes no demands in terms of culinary brilliance. In, fact, it seems that "hospitality" for Jesus is not about what you do or what you give or what you spend. It is about who you are. Hospitality is a matter of the heart. It is about welcoming people into our lives.

Which makes it such an important theme for the Moderator to take with him wherever he goes. Scotland will be a better place, Derek, and the Church of Scotland will be a better church, if you can call us all to be more

hospitable people. To be more hospitable to those who are weak and who cannot cope by themselves. May Jesus give us hearts of welcome.

For Jesus is the welcoming one, the best student at his own school of hospitality. I could not put it better than you did yourself, Moderator, only a few weeks ago. You said *The hospitality of Jesus reaches out to rich and poor, male and female, young and old, weak and strong. It transcends social status, racial boundaries and sexuality. It seeks to include and welcome, to acknowledge and release those gifts of grace which allow us in turn to be hospitable.*

It is no surprise that the central act of Christian worship is a act of hospitality. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, invites each of us and all of us to sit with him at his table and to share food and drink. The communion service is a service in which Jesus Christ welcomes us into his own company. No matter who you are, no matter what you have been.

I close this letter, dear Derek, with the promise of a little treat for you. There is a hymn about hospitality which is not yet known in Morningside. We are learn to sing it properly and with enthusiasm, and we will sing it when you return; and you will learn to love it too.

*For everyone born, a place at the table, to love without fear, and simply to be*

*To work, to speak out, to witness and worship, for everyone born, the right to be free*

Thank you for all you are doing for us. We remember you constantly in our prayers.

With very best wishes. Andrew

