

Thursday 3rd September 2020

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.”

Acts 16:25-34

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

Hebrews 13:2

Hospitality was valued in both the Old and New Testament to a far greater extent than it is valued in modern Western culture. Given the unforgiving terrain, scorching temperatures for large parts of the year and the ever-present threat of bandits on the road, hospitality was ongoing need. As well as providing security and shelter, the important elements of hospitality included the opportunity for cleansing dusty feet, scented oil to soften dried skin and mask odours of the road, alongside food and companionship.

Hospitality was also a sacred duty and the injunction to extend hospitality to strangers was frequently rooted in the recognition of our shared need. *“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.”* (Leviticus 19:34).

Frequently, the manner in which hospitality is offered or withheld is used in the Bible as a litmus to indicate the true righteousness or otherwise of the characters involved. The immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah was matched by the appalling manner in which they treated their visitors (Genesis 19) and this is counterpointed in the preceding chapter with the immaculate manner in which Abraham welcomed visitors into his household, not realising that he was actually entertaining God. In the New Testament (Luke 7:36-50), we see a supposedly sinful woman welcoming Jesus as an honoured guest whereas Simon, a Pharisee of higher social standing, offers neither water for washing nor oil. The Pharisee is condemned by Jesus whereas the sinful woman is told that her sins are forgiven.

Acts 16 shows two further examples of hospitality. First, Paul is welcomed by Lydia (*“If you consider me a believer in the Lord,”* she said, *“come and stay at my house.”* Acts 16:15) and then, after their miraculous escape from jail, Paul and Silas are welcomed into the home of the jailer who had been guarding them. Very often, those who welcome guests under their roof are shown to be those who also welcome God into their lives and so it is in this chapter. By way of contrast, the local authorities – instead of protecting these outsiders – had thrown Paul and Silas into jail (*“These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice”* Acts 16:20). Contrast that with the command given in Leviticus 19:34 above.

At the end of his first epistle, Peter reminds us that, as Christians, we ourselves are foreigners and exiles in a strange land (1 Peter 2:11). Pray that God will open our eyes to identify fellow travellers who need our help and that he will open our hearts so that we feel driven to offer them the love, welcome, protection and nurture that God has shown to us.