



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 31 August 2025 by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.**

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## **φιλοξενία – Hospitality for Strangers**

What would you be willing to do for £1,000? Would you run a marathon? Would you swim the English Channel? Would you clear the animal mess out of a zoo? Would you dust every pipe in our organ? Would you untangle miles of twisted cables? How far would you go to earn £1,000? Maybe you'd be willing to do almost anything for a bit of free cash, or you might think it's not enough to force you into discomfort.

Would you, voluntarily, allow strangers to judge your cooking and hosting skills while being made fun of on the television for the potential chance of winning £1,000? This might sound fun, or it might indeed sound like your worst nightmare. It would be interesting to know how many of you here today would be willing to go on the Channel Four reality programme, *Come Dine With Me*. In this show, which has been running since 2005, five amateur chefs in the same area of the country each host a three-course dinner party in their own home. They prepare the food, put on some entertainment, and get to know this group of strangers across their own dinner tables. While in a taxi home, the other contestants give the host a score. Then, after all five dinner parties, a winner is announced. £1,000 for the best dinner party host.

Although, it is not quite as simple as that. It is reality TV after all and there needs to be some over-the-top drama to keep the viewer entertained. There might be suddenly discovered allergies or food intolerances. Or the dreaded preferences! Woe betide the brave person who prepares a wonderful fish course to discover that Steve from Birmingham hates seafood and will reduce his score from a 5 to a 1 in an instant. Or the person who prepares a Michelin-worthy starter that Brenda from Colchester refuses to even touch because it contains mushrooms. In a bid to win, some contestants lose it all by being too ambitious. They attempt to wow the crowd with an elaborate Moroccan feast, but end up serving cold and mushy tabbouleh, followed by an undercooked tagine, with a side of eight tons of dry couscous. On national television, you might discover that the way you peel potatoes is so unique to you that nobody else in the world does it that way and all your guests laugh at you. The other contestants also, for TV drama reasons, often have a little snoop around your house while you cook. Making fun of any strange items or hobbies that you

might have. All the while, the voice of Dave Lamb provides a sarcastic and mean commentary for the viewers at home.

Personally, I don't think all of this torture is worth enduring for the chance to win £1,000. To be honest, it all sounds a little mean-spirited and cruel. Maybe, if I try to be exceptionally charitable, I could try to justify it as an attempt to show loving hospitality to a set of complete strangers. But, I think that may be too much of a rose-tinted perspective. It is not a model of humility at all. It's a competition. It's about being the best. Not for the sake of the other guests, but about making the best meal so that you receive the highest score. So that you can then laud it over your defeated competition at the end, waving £1,000 in front of their despondent faces. Not a model of Christian hospitality at all.

The model of hospitality that we instead see is one based on humility. One where the aim is not to be exulted or to gain glory. A hospitality that is radical because of its abundance of empathy, of indiscriminate sharing, and its rejection of reciprocity. Not battling it out to be the best and win £1,000 but offering love with no desire for reward or return.

By focusing on the language of our Biblical authors, we can discover what hospitality really means. It is not simply about putting on lavish dinner parties. It is a mindset. It is an act of faith. Hospitality is, at its core, the love of strangers.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses the Greek word φιλοξενία (philoxenia). Our translation, the NRSV, has tried to capture the meaning of this word by translating it as 'hospitality for strangers'. The one-word, φιλοξενία, that the anonymous author uses is made up of two parts. It starts with φιλία (philia). That is, love. It is the love of friendship, shared goodwill, and mutual respect. It is brotherly and sisterly love. This love is paired with the word, ξένος (xenos). That is, stranger, alien, or foreigner. Where we get words like xenophobic. These are the people who are different from us. Whether they be from other countries, other religions, or different backgrounds. Those of different socio-economic classes, different sexualities, different ethnicities, and different genders. Those who are different from us, the strangers, are the people hospitality calls us to love beyond measure. This exact compound word, φιλοξενία, appears only twice in the Holy Scriptures. Here in Hebrews (13.2) and once in St Paul's Letter to the Romans (12.13).

Φιλοξενία, hospitality, is about love for strangers. It is about welcoming, sharing with, supporting, and uplifting those who are different. Good hospitality is not simply about exulting oneself through elaborate and self-gratifying

spectacles. Hospitality can take many forms and is transformative when its motivating force is the love of strangers.

In our readings today, we find further wisdom about how we are to practice this hospitality. This love for strangers. In our first reading from Hebrews, we learn that hospitality is Incarnational and empathetic. As we read, 'Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured'. In our own hospitality and love for strangers, we must emulate the empathy that we see in Jesus Christ walking alongside and truly experiencing humanity. In our modern world, our hospitality challenges us to imagine ourselves in the shoes of others.

Hospitality, in this sense, speaks deeply into the present conversations about refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. For in all of our thoughts, our love for the stranger must first inspire us to empathise with their experience. To recognise the desperation that pushes someone to leave their home in search, not of prosperity or gain, but for the hope of survival and safety. Those people, made in God's Image, who have often spent much more than the measly £1,000 winnings of *Come Dine With Me* for a chance simply to live. The overwhelming and radical love of hospitality requires us to love the stranger. And, most beautifully, to be open to believing that in the stranger we will meet angels and find blessings. Remember, therefore, those who attempt to cross the Channel, as though you were in the small boat with them.

Behind our love for the stranger, there must be a foundation of humility. We see this in Jesus Christ's teaching in our reading from the Gospel according to St Luke. Here, Christ gives us the Parable of the Wedding Feast where He encourages us to take positions of humility rather than pride. 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exulted'. However, it is important for us to read on to know that true hospitality, motivated by humility, is not about reward. One should never be humble in order to be exulted. The motivation of humility should not be self-reward. However, exultation is the powerful consequence of genuine humility. Christ continues saying, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Hospitality is the love of the stranger. Hospitality is those actions that demonstrate love to those in need, that bring those who are far off closer to you, and that recognise that we are all God's children.

Here, this morning, we have the perfect embodiment of the love of hospitality. Jesus Christ instituted for us a transformative sacrament of hospitality in the Eucharist. In His Last Supper, the perfect meal of sacrifice offered to His disciples, Jesus Christ demonstrated His love to those he found as strangers. He gathered fishermen, outcasts, tax collectors, and sinners. He even shared His cup with Judas Iscariot, who He knew would betray Him. Christ also offered this meal, knowing that He would not receive anything in return. This is radical and loving hospitality in action. The Church, when following Christ, continues to set a table before all people that welcomes all strangers and demonstrates Christ's universal love. Not in the hope of glory or reward, but motivated by true love for humankind. This holy and blessed sacrament is offered to all. It unites us all into one family, one communion.

And so, as we partake in Christ's loving hospitality together today in the Eucharist, let us be fed to feed others. May our hearts be moved to show an outpouring of hospitality. Φιλοξενία, that is, the love of strangers. Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to love strangers, for by doing so you have entertained angels without knowing it.

Edward Day, Cathedral Curate

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