

A RAPID RESPONSE TO 'TOGETHER AT GOD'S TABLE: HOW PRACTISING HOSPITALITY SHAPES OUR IMAGINATION' BY JAMIE WILSON

By Carolyn Kelly

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It is a pleasure to respond to this interesting and insightful piece on the role of hospitality in shaping an imagination oriented to and shaped in relation to God's reconciling mission in the world. Wilson invites the reader to consider 'how imagination is actually formed and how we might get there', particularly how bodily aspects shape or *inform* our affective (imaginative) and wilful responses. His account of visiting a mosque and the hospitality extended to him nicely fleshes out what follows in the theoretical and philosophical exploration. Refreshingly, experience is given a fair hearing. In particular Wilson recounts how as a Christian leader his momentary displacement as an outsider or guest at a mosque, rather than in the role of host, informed his reading of Luke 10.

In that passage, the sending of disciples out to the villages in Samaria, Wilson suggests Jesus was 'inviting them into the habits and routines of a stranger and stripping them of all cultural capital'. Now, when attitudes towards the church are increasingly mixed and even sceptical, 'Luke 10 offers an urgently needed doorway from anxiety to engagement'. This is one of several New Testament passages to signal a radical engagement with the 'other', shedding fresh light on what it meant - and means - for guests and hosts to share with one another the peace of God. That is a challenging yet encouraging prospect in an uncertain future. In those encounters, the first disciples were challenged to accept a different status and role in the expression of hospitality, rather like a Christian in the US being hosted at a mosque.

In this vein, Wilson explores the first way hospitality may shape imagination by switching status, by becoming the hosted instead of the host. The second way is to act into that role: 'as we perform hospitality, our habitual routines give rise to our imagination for home, host and stranger. Our imagination for the other is generated out of the embodied routines that constitute our daily lives'; there is a close relationship between habits of life, and imagination. These material, lived dimensions shape faith in significant ways, yet have often been overlooked in discussions about Christian 'belief' and church practice. Increasingly the language of *habitus* is being linked to the emergence of imaginative insight, so this article is a timely contribution to that mapping of cultural transformation.

There are a couple of things I reflected on in response to both aspects. Firstly in relation to the embodied shaping of habits, just as performance shapes imagination, so a renewed, faith-filled imagination may shape performance; the interplay goes both ways. This is why a passage of scripture such as Luke 10 (if we believe God is Author and therefore present and active in some significant way) may be an encounter not dissimilar to that portrayed in Rublev's icon of the Trinity, wherein God is the host and we become the welcome guest for whom a place awaits. Likewise, the performance of a

eucharistic meal may *transform* (and not just inform) imagination in a way that gives rise to, or empowers, radical performance in tangible concrete ways as we go about life. I have seen and experienced occasions where, for example, power relations and conflicts operative elsewhere are suspended in gathering around a table (whether in a churchly liturgical or 'ordinary' settings), only to be significantly altered in ways that then change habits. Wilson's experience in the mosque and his readiness to receive that welcome, whilst not explicitly explored here, had been shaped by his own encounters with a living God-as-host who welcomes and had 'emptied himself taking the form of a slave' (Philippians 2:7).

Furthermore, our embodied particularities mean the challenges to be formed in new *habiti* vary according to different relations and roles within the 'hospitality imaginary'. How we inhabit the elements of place, host or guest/stranger and how the Spirit might thus transform us will be influenced by such things as gendered differences and power relations. So the practices of hospitality play out quite variously - not only in a setting like a mosque where a woman leader's experience would be quite different, but also in the home (which some theologians may be more inclined to theorise about than truly inhabit or be fully present, in the sense conveyed here). When I imagine being hospitable, for example, I don't think primarily of language or discourse as the dominant mode of interaction (although I hope to enjoy and participate in some of that) but rather of material details and the interplay of lived persons about to be present: what food to serve, whether the house is comfortable to gather in, how I can be fully attentive to my guests after having worked a full week. Whatever welcome I can offer the stranger is shaped at least in part by the welcome I experience myself and the roles and relationships I inhabit within that space and time. Thus, the space within which we experience and participate in *shalom* has a multitude of lived realities or 'cross-pressures' which threaten to overwhelm and render us less hospitable and space-making towards others. I know a number of people who whether through relationship breakdown, changes in status or the loss of a family 'home', feel like strangers and alienated within their own lives, so their capacity to imagine participating in a living, generative community manifesting genuine reciprocity has to be restored and nurtured. For such people, hosting others in a new setting is intensely risky, a radical act of restor(y)ing the sense of self in different communal interactions, perhaps what Zaccheus felt when Jesus announced he was going to dine at his house. Alternatively, for those accustomed to - or perhaps feeling enslaved by - regular home-making and cooking for others, becoming the guest is a welcome break, a glorious liberation that foreshadows the enjoyment of participating in the eschatological banquet. Being able to sit, to listen and join the conversation thus is wonderfully empowering, not disempowering. Perhaps this was Mary of Bethany's feeling when she abandoned her tasks in the kitchen and sat at Jesus' feet in the posture of a disciple.

Certainly there are power relations attached to being a host, but they come in different shapes and colours, so Luke 10 is a call to look for signs of welcome - whether at mosque, church kitchen, homeless shelter or banquet. As we recall how Jesus played fast and loose with the habits of hospitality in his culture, we can see new possibilities of meaning in our own whatever the roles we find ourselves negotiating (whether guest or host) and whatever spaces we find ourselves occupying (whether places we belong or places we don't). When at Simon the Pharisee's home, Jesus rebuked the host for his inadequate provision and attention to him as a guest, acknowledging the generous action of the

uninvited woman who kissed and washed his feet. He entered inhospitable spaces tarnished with bad reputations or that rendered him ritually unclean, such as the home of the Roman Jairus whose daughter had died. In the Wedding at Cana when the wine ran out, he took on the role of host and provider. At the feeding of the five thousand where the elements were provided by a child, Jesus foreshadowed his own offering and the radical retelling of God's provision to save. Remembering these role reversals and unexpected sites of blessedness gladdens my heart, here and now; my capacity to imagine new possibilities is renewed and I regard the 'other' more generously. Thus, the dislocations I experience, whether into strangers' spaces, inhospitable settings or the increasingly alien Sunday morning 'church', are given meaning in the sense of Luke 10 ('the Kingdom of God has come near to you').

In other words, there are metaphysical aspects to such encounters; we also live in light of the *habitus* of belonging and becoming in communion with Christ. Can each of us, indwelling our particular social and physical settings, also hear that Other invitation to "Come, join us" so beautifully captured in Rublev's painting? The 'hospitality imaginary' recounted in Wilson's experience in the mosque echoed *that* incorporation into honoured friendship, the prior experience of welcome at God's table. There are many 'missional' conversations driving the rush to appropriate other spaces and narratives of God in the neighbourhood. Perhaps however, this generative theological dimension (having dominated church-centred conversations) can be casually assumed, too readily neglected.



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