



WEEK 3: WELCOMING THE STRANGER

In the southeast of France is an isolated village called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Nestled in the mountains, this small farming community was involved in a remarkable act of hospitality during World War II.

When the Nazi's rolled into Paris in 1940, France was home to some 350,000 Jews. Over the next few years over 25% of them perished – either deported to concentration camps or dying in camps within France. Sensing the danger, many fled or looked for help.

While many courageous efforts were made by individuals to help conceal French Jews, the village of Le Chambon was a rare case of a whole community opening its homes, saving over five thousand Jewish children and adults, at great risk to their own safety.

It initially began as a trickle of desperate Jewish families looked for refuge, but as word got out, it eventually became a flood. The community of Le Chambon took them into their homes, hiding them from the authorities, and guiding many across the dangerous countryside to safety in neutral Switzerland.

And yet, the people of Le Chambon were quite unremarkable, in so many ways.

The villagers certainly did not consider themselves particularly virtuous for acting in such a way. Henri and Emma Heritter were typical of many in the understated way they acted, *“We never asked for explanations. When people came, if we could be of help, we did.”* Another villager, Georgette Barraud noted, *“It happened so naturally. We can't understand the fuss. It happened so simply...they'd often arrive at night. We'd manage somehow. We gave up our bed when nothing else was left...I helped simply because they needed to be helped...The Bible says to feed the hungry, to visit the sick. It's a normal thing to do.”*

Their rescue mission was “led” by Andre and Magda Trocme – the pastors of the Huguenot Protestant church in the village. After the Armistice was signed by the French Vichy government with Germany, Andre preached a sermon which inspired the people to action. He proclaimed that, *“The duty of Christians is to resist the violence that has been brought to bear on their conscience, through the weapons of the Spirit...we will do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.”*

Even so, the terms “led” or “organized” are really too strong to describe what actually happened. One of the intriguing aspects of the interviews conducted by Philip Hallie (recorded in his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*) and Pierre Sauvage (see his documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*) with surviving villagers decades after the war, is how naturally the acts of hospitality and refuge occurred. There did not seem to be anything particularly premeditated about the decision to rescue, nor highly organized - at least not initially. Magda Trocme explained, *“Each person, each day, did what seemed necessary. People often ask, ‘What was your organization?’ If we’d had one, we would have failed. You can’t scribble down what is to be done each day. As challenges arose, each person acted on their own. We didn’t know about everything. And people didn’t know what we were doing.”*

In fact, they were doing no more than acting out of their character and values – not just as individuals, but also as a community. It just seemed “the right thing to do”. Many villagers were descendants of the Huguenots – a heavily persecuted Protestant sect who for centuries had been hounded across Europe. They understood what it was like to be persecuted and to be refugees, not wanted wherever they went. This was part of their story – and indeed they held an annual ceremony to commemorate their Huguenot ancestors. The regular retelling of their story, combined with their immersion in the wider gospel narratives, no doubt helped to grow and shape the community’s embodiment of the virtues of mercy, compassion, hospitality, and non-violence so evident in their resistance efforts.

With the Trocmes leading by example, it was hardly surprising that the residents of Le Chambon would embrace such a risky rescue mission with little thought as to whether it was the wisest thing to do. These character traits had become part of them. As a result, the “decision” to offer hospitality was largely instinctive and automatic.

- Share one thing that impacts you about this story?
- Share about your Challenge of the Week.

Luke 10:25-37 Parable of the Good Samaritan

Read through this passage twice, pausing at the end of each read for silent reflection.

Setting the scene

1. The winding mountain road between Jericho and Jerusalem was a dangerous walk – particularly if you travelled alone.

2. We are so familiar with this most well-known of parables – and with the term “Samaritan” – that it’s difficult to appreciate the full, shocking impact this story would have had on its Jewish hearers. In fact, it would have been offensive to them.

3. Luke strategically places this parable on Jesus’s journey to Jerusalem from Samaria, where seventy-two of his disciples had just been involved in a “mission”.

“Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share.”
Jean Vanier

Discuss

- Speculate why you think the religion scholar seeks to test Jesus?
- The religion scholar knew the Law backwards. He understood the connection between loving God and loving his neighbor. But *who* do you think he considered his neighbor?
- Share what you know about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans.
- In what ways do you think the actions of the Samaritan exhibit “generous hospitality”?
- We’re not Jewish and we don’t despise Samaritans. So what types of people would *we* be expected to hate/dislike/discriminate against – or at the very least be unconcerned about – particularly in our work context? (Or what types of people do we find it hardest to be compassionate toward?) Why might we feel this way?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- In this story there is a hospitality worker – the innkeeper. What opportunities do you think this person would have had to go beyond his paid role in caring for the injured man? What about your own context – have there been opportunities for you to care for guests in ways that go beyond what is expected of you?

Reflective meditation

Now take a minute or two to meditate on each of the following phrases out of the text. Let them wash over you and ask God to speak to you, specifically in regard to your work context:

“Who is my neighbour?”

“Filled with pity/compassion”

“I’ll pay you whatever else you need”

“Go and do the same”

- Share one thing that came to mind in your silent meditation.

Love is a verb

Even though the word is not used in the text, the story of the good Samaritan is a classic example of hospitality. Love, compassion, mercy – these words weave their way through the parable. The truth is that love is a verb more than it is a noun. The Samaritan’s compassion (“filled with pity”) leads him to *act* in mercy – just as it did for the people of Le Chambon.

In the New Testament, one of the key words describing this type of active love is *philoxenia*. In our English Bibles it is translated “hospitality”. But the Greek word – taken literally, is more helpful in understanding its full meaning.

The two root words combined here are *phileo* and *xenos*. *Phileo* means love – a particular type of love – for those we are related to. Love for our family.

Xenos is the Greek word for stranger – or alien.

Combine the two and we have a powerful and countercultural dynamic. It involves loving those who are very different to us, in the same way we love our own family.

This is very much part of the message of this parable: the scholar of religion would have assumed that the answer to his question “Who is my neighbour?” would be a fellow Jew – not a despised foreign heretic! Yet, Jesus turns things on their head. In his story, the person who expresses true (generous) hospitality is actually the stranger, not a Jew!

Discuss

- Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann defines “strangers” as “*people without a place*”. Make a list of words that describe the features of being a “stranger”? (If you struggle with this, try thinking of what it might be like for a newly arrived refugee.)
- “*Go and do the same*” – what might that mean for you?

Stranger Danger

We are often warned to be wary of people we don't know or are different from us. Sometimes it's hard to work out whether our fear of getting involved or acting on our compassion is because of genuine fears *or* a result of ignorance, even misinformation, about the person and their background.

“One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor.” Heinrich Greeven

“Strangers” are people who don't fit – who are not in their natural habitat. They know it and we know it.

The place a stranger finds him or herself in is an intensely vulnerable one. And because they are not familiar with how things operate in their new surroundings, they often feel powerless and lacking in the resources needed to thrive.

Think about a time in your life when you were most vulnerable. It may have been an overseas trip to a culture thoroughly different to our own – with completely different language, cultural traits. It could have been when you first came into your workplace and found everything strange and uncomfortable. Or it may have been a time when your whole world seemed to disintegrate before your very eyes – a loved one dying, a dream evaporating, a relationship turning ugly. All of these are times when we have little, if any, internal resources to cope with what we are experiencing.

The world of a stranger contains a fair measure of disorientation and disillusionment. This is particularly the case for refugees (where most of what was familiar is now all gone) but also true for the highly introverted workmate, foster child, psychiatric outpatient, prisoner, homeless, immigrant, or recent arrival etc.

Discuss

- Share a time you have been a “stranger”. What did/does it feel like? Was there anything or anyone that helped?
- The parable suggests that there can be risks and cost involved in giving hospitality to others. Do you have any personal experience where being hospitable in some way, has cost you?
- What are some of the fears you have in expressing welcome/love/care to people you don’t know and/or are very different to you?
- What are some of the fears you have in receiving welcome from people you don’t know and/or are very different to you?
- How might we go about sifting through our apprehensions and fears to determine which ones are based on real issues, and which are simply a result of the unknown?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- In your work, have you ever felt threatened, at risk, or taken advantage of? Does this experience or possibility affect how you go about your role, and if so, in what way/s?

Prayer

Here’s a prayer from *A New Zealand Prayer Book* you might like to use, to close your time together:

*Lord, you have called us to serve you.
Grant that we may walk in your presence:
Your love in our hearts,
Your truth in our minds,
Your strength in our wills;
Until, at the end of our journey,
We know the joy of our homecoming
And the welcome of your embrace,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Challenge for the Week!

Prayerfully consider a way Jesus might be inviting you to step out of your comfort zone this week – i.e. take a risk! To do this, think of someone in your workplace you know is struggling in some way. Prayerfully consider one act of hospitality you could offer them this week that would express God’s love and care. This might mean inviting them for coffee, taking time to listen, chat and/or pray for them, inviting them out for a meal (or to home), offering to do a practical task for them etc.

If there are no obvious starting points for you, pray that God will give you the eyes to see an opportunity during the working week to be interrupted from what you are doing, to give attention to someone in need. This might be as simple as stopping to assist a new employee who is struggling to work out the photocopy machine, or taking a genuine interest in a customer.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

The Visitor (2007) 100 minutes

Summary: Walter is a recently widowed professor of economics from Connecticut, who travels down to Manhattan to stay in his city apartment while he is at a conference. He is startled to find a young couple living there. Tarek (a Syrian) and Zainab (a Senegalese) have in good faith rented it from a man who claimed it was his. The couple are both illegal immigrants. Although they have no place to go, they hastily pack and leave, but Walter decides to let them stay while they look for another place. Over the next few days, a friendship slowly develops. Tarek teaches Walter to play the djembe drum and they are each introduced to the other's world.



The Visitor explores a number of themes around hospitality, identity, cross-cultural communication, and immigration. All of this is set in the context of post-9/11 New York.

Some questions that may help you in your reflections and/or discussion are:

- It's clear that Walter has lost his sense of calling as a professor. He is just going through the motions. How does this display itself in his treatment of students and work colleagues?
- What are the features of Tarek, Zainab, and Mouna's lives as "strangers"?
- Walter appears as a very reluctant "host". Why do you think he decides to invite Tarek and Zainab to stay?
- In what ways are Tarek and Zainab "a gift" to Walter?
- In what ways is hospitality a two-way experience for Walter, Tarek, Zainab, and Mouna?
- Being vulnerable, powerless, and resourceless are three common themes for those who are "strangers". How is each of these visible in the lives of Tarek and Zainab?
- Generous hospitality is only truly possible when we attempt to put ourselves in the position of the other – and see things through their world. What allows this process to occur in this story?
- True hospitality cannot help but leave both parties unchanged. Reflect on how all the key characters in this story were changed by their experience together.
- Speculate on how Walter's experience with Tarek, Zainab, and Mouna might end up changing the way he viewed his job as a professor.

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- If you can, share an experience where you have “received” from your guest/s. How has this changed you and the way you understand your role?

Read Luke 10:25-37 (the parable of the Good Samaritan)

- In what ways do you think the actions of the Samaritan exhibit “generous hospitality”?
- We’re not Jewish and we don’t despise Samaritans. So what types of people would *we* be expected to hate/dislike/discriminate against? What types of people do we find it hardest to be compassionate toward? Particularly think about your workplace or industry. Why might we feel this way?