


Proper 17 / 11 Trinity Year C – St Helen's, Abingdon  
31 August 2025



Proverbs 25.6–7 / Hebrews 13.1–8, 15, 16 / Luke 14.1, 7–14

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares...

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

**W**HAT NERVE, WHAT DARING! Our letter has just finished talking about the *suffering* that comes from faithful discipleship: ‘a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes partners with those so treated,’ ‘the plundering of your possessions,’ torture, mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment, stoning, execution — the letter gives us this long list of terrible fates that befall disciples, then it presumes to advise us, ‘consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.’ Imitate their faith, so that the outcome of our way of life can get us flogged, imprisoned, and executed too?

This is not a positive appeal calculated to build church membership. Church growth experts tell us that in order to build up the church, we should observe the ‘homogeneous unit principle,’ on the premise that people like to be with other people just like them. They advise us we have to have a big, convenient parking lot. And they tell us that we have

to figure out what our neighbours think they need, and offer them that. We have to give them a practical reason to *use* the church.

And along comes a letter in the mail this morning, a letter from the saints centuries before us, and it says, ‘The thing you need to do is live in the way that got *us* chained and executed.’

Both of these collections of advice come to us in the name of building up the church. Both of these bits of advice come from church leaders. And these two chunks of helpful wisdom seem to be headed in directly opposite directions. The first advice, from the church growth experts, seems to point out ways we can make the church look more appealing; the second advice, from the Epistle to the Hebrews, points us toward ways of living that would make the church a good deal less attractive. Imagine the new strapline: ‘Come to St Helen’s, Abingdon — Go Directly to Jail.’

I do firmly believe that the church should make itself as *attractive* as it can. I love splendid music, and I love the reverent offering of heavenly worship. I try hard to preach carefully and persuasively, so that anyone who might have dropped by this morning out the blue would feel like the preacher cared enough to *think through* what he was going to say, and maybe even that he has a point now and then. I want the church to embrace all people, to include anyone who recognises here the beauty of holiness, who wants to draw near to the divine source of life and well-being. I’d be thrilled to see people from all over the Vale of White Horse *thronging* around the doors, *squeezing* into the pews, putting up with the heat and the crowding because they hunger for the spiritual food and drink they know they’ll receive from (as Susan Scott points out in our Newsletter) our hospitality.

But that forces us to face a question. Hebrews specifies that we’re to remember not just ‘our leaders’ — we’re to remember our leaders *who spoke the word of God to us*. We have plenty of leaders of one kind or

another: political leaders, athletic leaders, artistic leaders, all of them popular, all of them attractive. But our lesson calls us to follow those *who proclaimed the word of God*, and not just with their mouths, but with their lives. So the question is, Who proclaims the word of God? The epistle answers, 'People who show hospitality to strangers, people who remember prisoners, people who take seriously the promises they make before God and their neighbours at a marriage, people who steer clear of greed.' *They* are our leaders, whose lives make God's word visible to all who know them.

Now, I'm not a church growth consultant; I'm just a student of Scripture and a House-for-Duty preacher, so I don't have any certificated advice on the subject of increasing attendance or raising money. What I *can* tell you is that the Letter to the Hebrews would probably say, if you want a strong, healthy church you have to rely not on *marketing techniques*, but on the kind of faithful discipleship that can get the children of God *in trouble* with this world. When you care about *welcoming strangers* and making them feel at home, you have to forget the church-growth principle of attracting a congregation of all-the-same people. When you're so committed to following Jesus that you're willing to face mockery, derision, even imprisonment and sometimes torture, you can't just gussie up the gospel to pique people's self-interest. Trying to *market* the church tangles us up more and more with the desires and ambitions of the world; it tricks us into acting as though *the church* needs what *the world* offers, rather than that *the world* needs what *the church* offers. We get caught up trying to be young, pretty, convenient, inoffensive, and inexpensive, with free parking, instead of being faithful, honest, patient, steady, and true.

But the church is created for, the church *lives* for, and certainly what the church does *best* is to *live for God*. And I will tell you what I used to

tell my children, that the way to make friends *for life* is by being *true* to yourself, and by *welcoming* the people who like you that way. If you try to trim your personality to suit the friends you *want* to attract, you're only asking for trouble when they find out who you are day by day; if the church tries to attract visitors by telling them what they want to hear, making itself into what other people want, if the church trades in its true vocation and its glorious inheritance for the fast food of higher attendance, then we are no better than fast-talking politicians or money-hungry athletes or film stars, or heartless tycoons, people who exploit other folks' frustrations and longings to make their own selves rich.

*That's* not what we were called for. *That's* not what we do best. *That's* *certainly* not how people recognise us as disciples of Jesus. Our love for God shows when we *make space* for uninvited guests, when we *help out* people who *can't* help us. Our Galilean accent shows when we demonstrate our love for one another and for our neighbours. Our discipleship lives by the word of God, not huckstering to the desires of the world. We may not have flirtatious delights to share with strangers, but we have the beauty of holiness and love; we may not have bargains and discounts, but we have the presence of the Spirit bringing us together, encouraging us to speak the truth, empowering our faithfulness to the promises we made to God and to one another.

In other words, I trust that if we throw open our doors and give *our* kind of party, if we show hospitality by inviting *strangers* to this wedding feast of praise and thanksgiving, and if we *share* what we have in abundance, then God will bring the guests who hunger for what we have here. If we plant seeds in peacefulness and righteousness and faith, God will bring a rich harvest of blessings for anyone who longs for what grows here. If by faithful living, by honest speaking, we display the faith of those of our leaders who proclaim the word of God among us, then *God* will see to the numbers of members and pledges. Then we will

flourish in the hearts of everyone who loves the truth; we will look *plenty* attractive to all who recognise righteousness; we will grow strong in the power of the Spirit.

✙ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—

*Amen*