

The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel.

Brendan Byrne

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In this analysis of Luke's Gospel, Brendan Byrne works from the conviction that "the whole mission of Jesus according to Luke can be summed up in the phrase, 'the hospitality of God' (p. 50)." By this phrase, Byrne focuses on the meaning of salvation for the contemporary reader. The book is written as a commentary that grew out of a series of workshops that Byrne gave over a number of years.

A surface reading will reveal few surprises in this careful work. Its contribution lies in its "new" angle, namely, that Jesus' actions constitute a "visitation" in which the hospitality of God is offered. Byrne is also interested in the human response to this visitation, seeing human transformation as an integral focus of Luke's account of salvation. The term hospitality is a "two-way", or perhaps a "three-way", angle. Byrne highlights characters in the Gospel such as Zacchaeus and the Emmaus pair who respond to Jesus with hospitality, but throughout his analysis Byrne subtly and unobtrusively also reminds the contemporary reader that they are participants in the drama, called upon to respond with hospitality. From time to time he identifies "points of insertion" where the reader can respond as the implied reader.

Byrne himself points out that feminist readers will find no new wedge into which they can enter this Lukan world. For example, in his dealing with the women who minister to Jesus in 8:1-13 Byrne does not gloss over the implications of Luke's presentation of the women's auxiliary role and their proneness to mental illness. In a footnote he does recommend the reader to Barbara Reid's more detailed treatment of the text. Yet, while this is no explicitly feminist commentary, Byrne writes with awareness of, and sensitivity to, a feminist stance. For example, in his reading of the "Way to Emmaus" narrative (24:13-35) he rejects the likelihood that one of the disciples on the road was a woman. He shows in a footnote his reasons from a literary-critical stance, and comes out on the side of a more nuanced reason why a male pair is much more conducive to a feminist reading. Again, the feminist issue is implicitly dealt with in the Joseph of Arimathea episode (23:50-53). Byrne parallels this faithful Israelite in his gesture of hospitality with women such as Elizabeth and Anna and the sorrowing daughters of Jerusalem.

Byrne uses some verbal gems. One of these is his use of the "beachhead" symbolism. In his reading of the man who is freed from the demon (8:26-39) he refers to the liberated man's being sent to his home to "make it a little beachhead" of the hospitality of God" (p. 82). Again the beachhead image is used in reference to the Lord's Prayer. Byrne speaks of the praying community as seeing itself as a beachhead of the kingdom in the present world, reclaiming it for life and humanity (104). "In short", says Byrne, "it prays that the entire human race may enjoy the hospitality it has itself received from God" (p.105). While the "beachhead" is admittedly somewhat

male imagery, it is nevertheless evocative of, and pertinent to, the inherent conflict motifs in the Gospel.

Subtly, Byrne weaves contemporary issues into this theme of hospitality. In reference to the eschatological preaching of Jesus, Byrne draws our attention to the apocalyptic implications of the global crisis that the earth community has become aware of in terms of the ecological, economic and sociological issues facing us. He cautions that we have a race against time to make the world a hospitable place for its inhabitants (110).

In the account of the Passion narrative Byrne does not allow his theme of hospitality to obtrude unnecessarily; indeed, I would have expected more to be made of the Paradise theme but that is dealt with in a footnote, and then in reference to the Garden of Eden symbolism.

Byrne's final summing up is most useful. In a series of sixteen points he identifies the leading ideas of his commentary, summarising the theological concept of salvation in the gospel.

This is a scholarly and reverent work, yet immensely readable. It makes use of traditional historical-critical methodology side-by-side with more contemporary methodology. Thus there are, for example, subtle references to historical Jesus issues in his reading of the struggle at the Mount of Olives (p 175) and social scientific motifs identified in the parable of the friend at midnight (p. 105). Narrative criticism and reader response are also employed in Byrne's findings without being identified as such and thus without spoiling the flow of the commentary. A perusal of the bibliography shows the inclusion of feminist writers (Durber, Ringe and Reid), narrative critics (Tannehill, Coleridge and Powell), social science critics (Bailey) as well as the "classics" such as Fitzmyer and Conzelmann.

This is a commentary in which an abundance of scholarship supports a genuinely spiritual response to Luke's good news. It fulfils admirably Byrne's claim that it is a commentary where every episode is commented upon within a "total, unified interpretation" (p. 2). I recommend it heartily to the scholar and the wider community alike.