

New Year's Day 2019.

The Christmas holiday season is noted here in Australia, as in all countries with a large Christian presence, for its hospitality. In the lead-up to Christmas office parties are common. Right now we have family gatherings with extravagant meals and exchange of gifts. Out-of-town guests may arrive, and we welcome them warmly into our homes to take part in the festivities. We share greetings with one another, as we do at no other time of the year. We even decorate our homes with lights and special ornamentation to suggest that our homes are filled with happiness and good cheer, - that we wish for everyone. Hopefully this is true!

In today's Gospel reading St. Luke presents us with a short narrative about shepherds coming to visit Mary and the baby. It must have been a memorable visit, because the shepherds left glorifying God for the wonders they had seen. We can only imagine the welcome Mary offered the shepherds as she showed them her son and exchanged wonderful stories with them. And this is how Mary would forever be remembered. Christians throughout the centuries have seen her as a model of hospitality. Paintings and statues of Mary usually present her with arms open wide in welcome.

There is something grace-filled about hospitality. Have we ever walked into a home where we felt genuinely welcomed? Where we were put at ease immediately with an encouragement to "make yourselves at home"? Have there been times when we gathered with old friends, and their faces lit up with excitement at seeing us? There is power in hospitality. It makes us feel loved. It frees us to be ourselves, without formalities, or the need to put on a show. It's a wonderful feeling and we rarely forget it.

Can we imagine what neighbourhoods would be like with more evidence of hospitality? What our workplaces would be like? What world conditions would be like if nations were more hospitable to one another? Think of how racial tensions and ethnic intolerance would diminish if hospitality were more a rule of life? Consider how much more meaningful our worship services would be if churches were truly dedicated havens of welcome?

The Book of Numbers records a beautiful blessing which we heard in our first reading: "May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord let his face shine on you
and be gracious to you.

May the Lord uncover his face to you
and bring you peace."

This blessing is more than a piece of pious poetry; it suggests a frame of mind. Our calling and joy, as Christians, is to bless people with our own graciousness. This means maintaining an attitude of accepting people just as they are, and letting them know that they, and their needs, are important to us. This, of course, may not always be easy to do, but it certainly provides us with a wonderful New Year's resolution, - that we be hospitable in our dealings with everyone, - to open our hearts to others.

Remember, that people generally perform according to the expectations you have of them. Enemies, for example, are usually made, not found. Get to know more people around you, including here where we come to worship. Keep a smile on your face and willingly offer your services to those in need. What can you do to make your home a place where everyone can feel at home? Can you be more cordial when people ask for directions, or more agreeable when someone asks you for help? Think of Mary and her open arms.

We are blessed, and can afford to bless in return.