

Hospitality: Theirs and Ours



Over the past 15 years of living and working amongst peoples from the Middle East (both in that region and in the UK), I have learned so much about hospitality. I have been humbled, and I have decided that I often just can't compete. Whatever you do, they come back with more and greater. It has impacted me deeply and in every aspect of life: how we create an atmosphere of hospitality in the Foodbank, in the English class, and even giving a lift to someone. It is a beautiful thing. It's hard work, and it requires self-sacrifice when you're sometimes just a bit too busy and you don't *feel* like it. And still, despite my efforts, I can't compete. I'm just too dry and western. I can't always be bothered to "play the game" and I've got far too much on, and, frankly, my cooking is found wanting.

Last year, for example, we were invited for dinner at my husband's students' home. They are from a Kurdish background, and they KNOW how to barbecue meat! We felt like the prodigal son come home. There was a real banquet laid out for us; a full table of fresh juicy barbecued meat, plus various salads, desserts and so on. Even when I sat there eating, I thought to myself, 'there's no way we're going to be able to reciprocate!' And sure enough, we haven't yet been brave enough to invite them in return. I fear *our* hospitality would be an insult to them!



In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says "Let your good deeds shine out for all to see". I'm challenged: my Middle Eastern friends always seem to outdo me in hospitality. So, where do I go from here?

This verse about our good deeds comes from a teaching on salt and light in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. What is this salt? What is this light? Jesus' way is different: He goes on to talk about the moral parameters of a righteous person: about divorce, loving our enemies, revenge, being honourable in our speech without invoking the name of God, about anger, money, and so on...

We were fortunate to be able to play the "foreigner" card when living in *their* country, and the "westerner" excuse now living amongst their community *here*. They will have expected

clumsiness in our *diyafa* (ضيافة or hospitality) and, if they are gracious, they will overlook our mistakes, so long as we don't really muck it up.

[Their rich hospitality is, in part, a normal expression of the culture they come from, but it's also connected to honour. By visiting them in their homes, we are honouring them - an unusual concept for many westerners. Their hospitality therefore also carries within it an expression of their appreciation for this honour that we bring. We may feel uncomfortable with this, but it is actually giving them a welcome opportunity to be themselves, to be appreciated, to be recognised as active and generous hosts. We can be part of building them up as we receive.]

It's still good for us to reciprocate such hospitality, and the giving and receiving of honour. But perhaps we can show this in different ways, western ways, exploring if there are differences between men/women/mixed groups/families doing hospitality, and trying new ways ourselves? And so we do. But, in some ways just as importantly, what we pray that they see during those times of our clumsy hospitality, is our response to conflict, our approach to marriage and parenthood, our peace with others, and all manner of evidence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Even in our faces, and in the atmosphere of our homes.



So, in our imperfect attempts at hospitality, let our light shine before others by keeping our eyes upon the true King of hospitality, who sets a banquet before us, and is the mostly gentlemanly of hosts, knowing that Christ can reveal himself through us, but with a large sugar lump of humility.